



Second Session, 38th Parliament

OFFICIAL REPORT OF
DEBATES OF THE
LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
(HANSARD)

Monday, February 27, 2006
Afternoon Sitting
Volume 6, Number 13

THE HONOURABLE BILL BARISOFF, SPEAKER

ISSN 0709-1281

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

LIEUTENANT-GOVERNOR
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SECOND SESSION, 38TH PARLIAMENT

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Honourable Bill Barisoff

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MONDAY, FEBRUARY 27, 2006

The House met at 2:03 p.m.

Tributes

CANADIAN OLYMPIC TEAM

Hon. O. Ilich: I would like to take this opportunity to congratulate all of our Canadian athletes who gave it their best in Torino and who are model ambassadors of the Olympic ideals of fair play, tolerance and friendship. I would especially like to congratulate Christine Keshen of Invermere and Sandra Jenkins of Salmon Arm for their bronze medal in women's curling. We all look forward to cheering on our Paralympic team beginning March 10.

Yesterday marked the end of the games in Torino and began the official countdown to 2010, and in 2010 it will be our turn. That's 1,445 days from now. So would the House please join with me in congratulating Canada's and B.C.'s Olympic athletes for a job well done.

Introductions by Members

C. Puchmayr: Today I have a couple of very special guests in the gallery from my riding of New Westminster. They are Lynn Bueckert and Craig Derksen, and they are Olympians in their own right for all the work they do in volunteer work in our city.

J. Yap: I would like the House to join me in welcoming 30 students — grade five and six classes — from a school in my riding, Tomekichi Homma Elementary School, who are visiting the Legislature today. They're in the precincts. They may be in the gallery, and they're with their teacher Mr. Don Allison. Would the House please make them feel welcome.

C. Evans: We have the honour of being visited today by a constituent of mine, Candace Batycki. She's sitting in the audience. Would members make her welcome and excuse her for the company that she keeps.

[1405]

Hon. P. Bell: We're joined today by a group of gentlemen who represent a new industry that's developing significant momentum in northern British Columbia, and that is bioenergy. It's becoming a significant player, certainly an environmentally friendly industry, that's looking to a new future in B.C. Please join me in welcoming Clay Anderson, who's the founder and secretary of C.H. Anderson and Partners; Gary Griffith; Len Sandstrom; and someone who's no stranger to this House, Brian Menzies.

N. Macdonald: It's my pleasure to introduce the company that Candace is keeping, which is John Bergenske, a constituent of mine. Please make him feel welcome.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. members, I would like to welcome today 31 Washington State legislative interns seated in the Speaker's gallery. They are part of an annual internship exchange between Washington State and British Columbia. The exchange is an opportunity to share, learn, observe and compare our two systems of governance.

Some of you had meetings with them and discussed the differences between representative and parliamentary democracy. The exchange is a valued part of our own B.C. legislative internship program. They are accompanied by their House intern coordinator, Joan Elgee. Would the House please make them welcome.

I also have a special guest that I would like to introduce today. It's my pleasure to advise you that we have the visiting Clerk from another jurisdiction on attachment with our House this week, Dr. Floyd McCormick, Deputy Clerk of the Yukon Legislative Assembly. The visit is one of a continuing series of attachments whereby our Legislative Assembly hosts Clerks from other jurisdictions. Please join me in welcoming Floyd McCormick to British Columbia and our House.

Introduction and First Reading of Bills

APOLOGY ACT

L. Mayencourt presented a bill intituled Apology Act.

L. Mayencourt: I move that the bill be introduced and now read a first time.

Motion approved.

L. Mayencourt: It gives me great pleasure today to introduce the Apology Act. Under current law, an apology can be construed as an admission of liability. This legislation would counter that presumption.

The Apology Act is intended to specify that an apology is not an admission of liability and is not admissible in legal proceedings. Ultimately, this will remove the current disincentive to apologize for one's behaviour, which often hinders the resolution of disputes. In special report 27, *The Power of an Apology: Removing the Legal Barriers*, released February 8, Ombudsman Howard Kushner recommended that this government introduce legislation to enable public agencies to say they are sorry without the fear of having it used against them in court.

This government understands that our society places great value on apologies as a way of redressing wrongs. An apology is seen as the appropriate moral response. Despite this fact, public agencies rarely apologize for fear of liability or denial of insurance coverage. In fact, lawyers often advise their clients not to apologize. By allowing public agencies to apologize,

the Apology Act will help to facilitate the prompt, cost-effective resolution of disputes.

This act will also allow individuals to apologize to one another, promoting forgiveness and the re-establishment of relationships. A simple, sincere apology is often the key to avoiding a long and bitter and costly dispute. Apologies help to build public confidence in the administration of justice, and they build stronger communities by allowing people to be civil, to address wrongs and to move on with their lives. The Apology Act encourages the moral and humane behaviour of apologizing for wrongdoings and promotes open and direct dialogue between persons in conflict.

Similar legislation has been passed in California, New South Wales and other states in Australia. In these regions sincere apologies have facilitated early and cost-effective resolutions and, most importantly, promoted forgiveness and healing. Once again, British Columbia has the opportunity to lead the way in law reform in Canada, and I encourage this government and members on both sides of the House to support the Apology Act.

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

Bill M202, Apology Act, introduced, read a first time and ordered to be placed on orders of the day for second reading at the next sitting of the House after today.

[1410]

Statements (Standing Order 25b)

CANADIAN OLYMPIC ATHLETES

J. McIntyre: Mr. Speaker, beyond a shadow of a doubt, success for both Canada and British Columbia abounded at the Turin Winter Games. From our record-breaking 24 medals, up from the 17 we won at Salt Lake City, to the overwhelming popularity of the B.C.-Canada Place log cabin, Canada and our athletes were front and centre in Turin.

Much of this success is due to our female athletes. Their 16 medals tied for first with Germany, and our flag-bearer Cindy Klassen became the first woman to win five medals at one games. Added to her medal from Salt Lake City, she's now become Canada's most successful Olympian. From day one to the closing ceremonies, our women exceeded all expectations.

Women have come a long way in the games. The first Winter Olympics in Chamonix in 1924 saw only 11 women compete in one event — figure skating. None of these were Canadian. Today women compete in 13 disciplines, and Canada was represented by 86 women athletes.

There are many reasons for this success. The Own the Podium program, private sector sponsorship, government support and the legacies from the '88 Calgary Olympics — all assist in the training and development

of our athletes. But with the focus on the medal count, let's not forget about the real Olympic spirit — participating for your country. I would like to add my congratulations to all the athletes, coaches and Canadian Olympic officials for representing our country with honour and pride.

With the Paralympic Games set to begin on March 10, I'm sure the success will be duplicated, and I wish these athletes all the best. The countdown has started, and in less than four years the eyes of the world will focus on Vancouver and Whistler, so I can hardly wait.

WESTSHORE CENTRE FOR LEARNING AND TRAINING

M. Karagianis: This year marks the 20th year that the WestShore learning centre has been delivering quality academic programs and business training in the Greater Victoria area. The continuing education program in Sooke school district was reinstated in 1986. In 1997 the program established its own home base on the campus of Royal Roads University, and at that time the name changed to community education to reflect the youth and adult entrepreneurship programs being offered. In the spring of 2003 a strategic planning process resulted in the current name, the WestShore Centre for Learning and Training, reflecting the desire to be the hub of learning in the West Shore.

For academic upgrading, on-line courses, career training, teaching overseas or taking a personal interest course, WestShore has a program and has options and choices. The campus works in partnership with other groups, such as Royal Roads University, as well. WestShore learning centre has the advantage of being able to respond to changing needs within the community, with amazing results.

The M'Akola Housing Society recently completed a 60-unit assisted-living project in Langford. Part of the project includes in-house dining that provides lunch and dinner for the tenants and has a large and fully functioning commercial kitchen. The kitchen was designed with additional capacity to provide training opportunities. M'Akola approached WestShore learning centre 18 months ago and proposed a collaboration. Their large kitchen would provide an excellent training opportunity for chefs apprenticeship programs for first nations students.

WestShore responded immediately, designing a learning program that was customized for the purpose, helping M'Akola to realize its goals while offering new and very relevant career options that would result in a career for first nations students. Today those students are furthering their education and gaining real on-the-ground experience and apprenticeship training with this very successful program.

[1415]

Recently the kitchen hosted an open house and showed off all their culinary talents. I attended that event and spoke with the chef, who proudly showed off the kitchen staff and bragged enthusiastically about

the wonderful students that he was getting from the WestShore learning centre.

DOWN SYNDROME RESEARCH FOUNDATION

R. Lee: More and more international organizations are coming to British Columbia to hold their conferences and conventions. In six months the 9th World Down Syndrome Congress will be held in Vancouver. I am proud to see that the Down Syndrome Research Foundation of Burnaby North is the host of this convention.

Down Syndrome is a genetic disorder resulting from abnormal cell division before or after conception. About 95 percent of all people with Down syndrome are of type trisomy 21, which means that all the cells in their body have an extra chromosome — 47 instead of 46 — but this type is not genetically inherited. It is not completely understood why the chromosome becomes irregular, and currently there is no known treatment.

The Down Syndrome Research Foundation was formed in 1995 to empower people with Down syndrome, to disseminate information and to support research projects related to Down syndrome. Last year the foundation completed the installation of a magnetoencephalography or MEG laboratory in Burnaby. MEG is a non-invasive technique based on the measurement of external magnetic fields produced by neural currents in the cerebral cortex.

The whole MEG instrumentation system was manufactured by a local B.C. company, VSM Medtech. Research collaborations have been established with Simon Fraser University, the University of British Columbia, University of Victoria and the Children's and Women's Health Centre of B.C.

The Down Syndrome Research Foundation is a shining example of British Columbians coming together to support the families, to develop people's potential and to push the frontier of technology and science. Please join me to wish them every success in bringing experts from all over the world to British Columbia to further our knowledge of Down syndrome.

Mr. Speaker: A reminder, members. They are two-minute statements.

THE VALLEY OF THE FRASER

H. Bains: I had an opportunity to enjoy a wonderful book called *The Valley of the Fraser* written by two long-term residents of Surrey, Lorne Pearson and his late father, John. This is a true historical novel about Surrey heritage that the Pearsons researched for several years. The book describes the life of one of the first pioneer settlers, named Eric Anderson, who helped establish the city of Surrey.

The story takes us back to the spring of 1872, when Eric Anderson jumped ship to start a new life in a new land. Eric had sailed the high seas for nearly eight years and had never laid eyes on such beauty, the stand of giant trees that covered the shores of Burrard

Inlet. Once on land he walked for a whole day and night before he came to New Westminster.

Walking down the river, he bartered with a native gentleman to take him across the river in his canoe. He walked another day and night and came on another European settlement called Murray's Corners. On the banks of the Nicomekl he picked out a piece of land, cleared it and built a cabin to call his home. The hand-hewn log cabin built in 1872 still stands today on the site of the Surrey museum and is the oldest standing man-made structure in the city of Surrey.

On November 10, 1879, the municipality of Surrey was incorporated. In September 1882 Surrey's first school was established with a one-room shack donated by a bachelor named Robinson, and Martha Jane Norris as the first teacher. School district 36 followed and was incorporated in 1906. The first church in the area was completed in August 1884 at Surrey Centre. In 1909 the B.C. Electric Railway bought some of his land, and Anderson Station was built, named after the Anderson family.

I would like to thank Mr. Lorne Pearson and his late father for the heartfelt thought and research that went into this novel, for many of us to learn of the hard work and dedication that our forefathers endured to make our city of Surrey what it is today.

[1420]

Mr. Speaker: The member for Burnaby-Willingdon.

[Applause.]

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND MULTICULTURAL UNDERSTANDING

J. Nuraney: Thank you, one and all. I don't know what to say, but I do certainly appreciate that.

Mr. Speaker, as we know, the cartoons and caricatures published in Europe have caused unrest and invoked unprecedented pain among the Muslim population around the world. It has also initiated discussion over expression and individual liberties. While it is important in a democratic society to protect the right of individuals to the freedom to express their opinions, it is equally important to understand that the very fundamental requisite of a civil society is to respect the ethics and beliefs of others.

Freedom of speech should not be interpreted as a licence to offend. We should encourage a better understanding among communities and demonstrate ethical sensibilities which can be shared across denominational lines and which can foster a universal moral outlook. The search for justice and security should not be opposite to the quest for tolerance and harmony. Both are parts of the pursuit of human dignity. These are the imperatives which we must work towards and think about on a daily basis.

Canada is a unique country that nurtures multiculturalism, and its success can be solely attributed to the degree of mutual respect among its citizens. It is this

value that has made Canada an envy of the world, and we must continue to uphold it.

BLACK HISTORY MONTH

S. Simpson: I'm pleased to have the opportunity today to rise in the House and talk a little bit about the tenth anniversary of Black History Month in British Columbia. Our black community has a rich history commencing back in 1800, when over the following 65 years the Underground Railway operated, bringing over 20,000 slaves from the United States to their freedom in Canada. This was motivated by the passing of the Abolition Act in 1793, banning slavery in our country.

The black community first came formally to British Columbia in 1858, when 600 black Americans were invited to Victoria by then Gov. James Douglas. This community has continued to develop and to contribute as an integral part of British Columbia. In 1964 Harry Jerome won a bronze medal at the Tokyo Olympics. In 1972 Rosemary Brown became the first black woman to be elected to a Legislature in Canada when she took her seat in this place. Of course, Mr. Speaker, in 1994 your predecessor Emery Barnes became the first black Speaker of the B.C. Legislature. One year later, in 1995, Selwyn Romilly became the first black justice appointed to the B.C. Supreme Court. Of course, in the past year Madam Michaëlle Jean, a black woman, was appointed Governor General of Canada.

However, as proud as we can be of the contribution of black Canadians, we also need to remain vigilant in our continuing efforts against oppression. As Madam Jean said in a recent speech in Montreal, the struggle against oppression is not just one of race but one for all men and women who demand respect and dignity.

As we celebrate the tenth anniversary of Black History Month, we should all be well advised to remember Madam Jean's words as we respond to the many thousands of British Columbians of all races who are struggling today to achieve the respect, the dignity and the opportunity that we all aspire to.

Oral Questions

REVIEW OF SENIORS CARE IN HEALTH FACILITIES

C. James: Just last week we learned from the Health Minister that he'd decided not to join the Premier and his brother-in-law on their European tour. He said he wanted to stay in British Columbia to deal with the tragic case of the Albo family.

[1425]

It was the right decision — to leave the Premier and his brother-in-law to travel on their own while the Health Minister stays home. But the Albo case is not simply one case. We know there are other tragic cases out there.

My question to the Health Minister is: will he expand his inquiry to look at other health regions?

Hon. G. Abbott: Last Wednesday in question period the member for West Kootenay–Boundary, followed by the Opposition House Leader, indicated with a question very much like that — would I look at other cases, should they come to me? — and I indicated at that time that I would invite the members to submit any case files they had that they may have concerns about, and I would look at them and see if there was further that should be done in respect of those reviews beyond what would normally be done by a health authority. At one o'clock this afternoon I received from the member for West Kootenay–Boundary a list of four that she contends are reflective of some failing in the system or failing by caregivers.

I am not going to jump to any premature conclusions about that. I need more than 60 minutes to look at case files before I form conclusions about them. But I will be looking at them and, if appropriate, will do further reviews on them.

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

C. James: I appreciate that the minister has just received the specific cases, but we mentioned these cases last week. In the travelling around that I've done in the province, just in the last couple of weeks on health care, it's very clear that there's case after case after case out there.

This is an issue about accountability — accountability to the seniors and the families of this province. It's very clear that just in a few days the opposition, receiving phone calls, has received at least five cases to date. I would think that would raise enough red flags on behalf of seniors and families in this province that the minister would automatically expand the inquiry.

So I ask again: will the minister expand the inquiry to all five of the health regions to ensure that seniors are treated well?

Hon. G. Abbott: The opposition leader seems to me to be demanding a specific response to generalized concerns. As I said in the House last week and as I'll repeat again here today, I am pleased at all times to receive submissions, case files, other concerns from all members of this House. To date — and we talked about this today — I've received over 200 different concerns, case files and so on from members of the opposition about different issues. I've probably received a comparable number from members of the government side. In every case we look very seriously at what is submitted to us. Where we can, we undertake actions to remediate situations.

Again, we have an exceptionally good health care system in this province. Is it perfect? No. On those occasions when it is not perfect, I want to hear about it, both from the opposition side and from the government side. But in fairness to families, in fairness to caregivers, in fairness to medical practitioners, in fairness even to health authorities, we need to review these matters very carefully before forming conclusions.

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

C. James: I wish I could say that this wasn't a common refrain from the other side. We heard, under Children and Families, when we raised concerns.... For seven months from this government we heard over and over and over again that everything was fine. We heard that we had an exceptional system for looking after children and families at risk. It took seven months before the government finally acknowledged that they had failed children at risk and brought in a review. Well, when I hear the minister say that we have an exceptional health care system, I worry we're going down the same path.

I would like to ask the Health Minister: can we forget about the seven months of denial? Can we forget about seven months of saying the health care system is exceptional? Can we serve our seniors today and expand that review to include all health regions?

[1430]

Hon. G. Abbott: The opposition leader uses the term "accountability." I'd suggest that the members of the opposition have some accountability as well. Five days ago they committed to bringing four case files to my office. They did that 60 minutes ago and now stand up and, with a great deal of bluster, tell me that we should have formed conclusions about these four cases. I think the members, if they want to have a lesson in accountability, have got to think about what they do as well.

This is a very large health care system that we have in this province, and 99.99 percent of the time people get exceptional service from that health care system. There are 120,000 people who work directly and indirectly in that health care system. They work hard each and every day to provide caring, supportive attention to the patients that they serve. Do they make mistakes sometimes? Yes, on occasion they do. We try to correct them, learn from them and build a better health care system for this province.

K. Conroy: This is not about people making mistakes or making decisions out in the regions. This is about the minister's and this ministry's policies — policies like the first available bed that is taking its toll on seniors and their ability to receive the care they need and deserve in our home communities. It was a first-available-bed policy that was going to have Freda Plested moved from her home in Trail to Grand Forks. The family was so upset that they instead opted to pay \$145 a day to have her cared for in a private facility near their home.

My question is to the minister. Why are families forced to seek out private care if they want their loved ones to be around family and friends in their very fragile end-of-life state?

Hon. G. Abbott: I thank the member for her question and for providing me with the information about

an hour ago that she had promised. I do appreciate that, and I will be looking into the member's concerns.

In terms of wait times, again, we need to keep this in perspective. When we took office five years ago, people were waiting approximately one year for accessing residential care in this province. Today the range of wait time is between 18 days in the Vancouver Coastal Health Authority to 88 days in the Interior Health Authority. I think 88 days is way too long. We need to continuously try to bring that number down.

Again, if you look at the policy around first available bed, it is an attempt to ensure that the people who need that care get access to that care. The member can argue, I guess, that it's wrong, but in fact that's what it is doing. It's ensuring that if people need residential care, that's what they are able to access, and we try to get them near their homes as quickly as possible.

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

K. Conroy: Well, 88 days is too long, and the closure of beds in our region is responsible for these decisions. The Plesteds also found that the cost of private care was unmanageable, so they were forced to take the first available bed in Nelson, two hours away from their home. Freda Plested was transferred to Nelson on January 30 of this year. Ten days later she passed away.

The Ministry of Health is currently undertaking an investigation into the tragic loss the Albo family has suffered. Will he commit today to expanding that investigation into the other cases where, because of this government's policies, seniors are being separated from their families?

[1435]

Hon. G. Abbott: The case the member cites is one of the four that she has listed in the letter which she generously provided to my office one hour ago. Again, as I said in response to the question from the Leader of the Opposition, I'll be very pleased to look at this specific case. I'll be very pleased to review it with the Interior Health Authority and with ministry staff. We will see whether there were issues that we should look at beyond those that have been identified by IHA or others or by the member.

Again, I am not going to be forming any conclusions prematurely about this. It can be unfair to the family, unfair to the care providers and unfair to the medical practitioners who often have to make difficult decisions around these matters as well. We will review the member's submission very carefully and form appropriate conclusions in a timely way.

D. Cubberley: The minister insists it's not the policy of this government to separate seniors, and he claims there is no first-available-bed policy. Yet at 93 Mr. Ferdinand Schneider was moved on December 1 from Kootenay-Boundary Hospital, on the first-available-bed policy, nearly two hours away to Moun-tain Lake Seniors Community in Nelson. Tragically,

Mr. Schneider died just a few weeks ago, only three months after leaving his family, his friends and his home. Now, will the minister admit that the ministry's first-available-bed policy is what is forcing seniors to leave their loved ones for needed care?

Hon. G. Abbott: Again, as I said the other day in the House, it is not the policy of this government to separate seniors. It has never been the policy of any government in British Columbia to separate seniors. The suggestion that it has been the policy of any government is colossally unfair. As I patiently explained to the member the other day, what we attempt to do is provide exceptional care for all frail elderly who require that care.

I cited the case of my parents the other day in the House. My father had a series of strokes at 80 years of age. He was incapacitated by those strokes and required, at first, acute care and subsequently residential care. My mother was and remains in perfect health. It was medical necessity that separated them. That is often the case here, and it's entirely unfair of this member and the opposition to suggest that any government has a policy of separating seniors in this province.

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

D. Cubberley: What we said is that this government has a policy of first available bed, and that has the effect in certain circumstances of separating seniors. The minister sees family separation as the exception, when in fact there's a pattern. Last week he blamed individual judgment rather than the policy of first available bed. In fact, he blames everything but the reality of insufficient hospital and residential care beds in British Columbia, which predisposes health authorities to make bad choices for seniors.

What I want to know is: when is he going to stop the denial? When is he going to expand the scope of this inquiry to include the government-induced shortage of hospital beds, the premature closure of residential care beds and the policy of first available bed? When are you going to face up to it, and when are you going to fix it?

Hon. G. Abbott: Again, I think the members opposite really need to give their heads a bit of a shake on this point. To think that they should provide me with a brief summary of case files at one o'clock on Monday afternoon and then have me form conclusions about whether a full-scale inquiry is appropriate in response to that is completely inappropriate and unfair on their part.

The members should think about this. We need to get to a place where we're satisfied that the right thing is being done by the right people at the right time. We are very concerned, for example, about the case of Mrs. Albo. It appears, in fact, that in that case, there was an inappropriate decision made to make a medical transfer. I am going to await the report of my deputy in re-

spect of exactly what the chain of decision-making was and whether the right things were done.

[1440]

Further, there may be important things we can learn about that case, but let's understand the facts. Let's understand what happened and then form our conclusions, not at the start of it.

C. Wyse: Now we know that the tragic story of the Albo family is, most unfortunately, not one of a kind. Elmer Hall also died away from his family and friends. Mr. Hall was moved from the regional hospital in Trail to a care home in Grand Forks in September 2005. He died less than a month later — alone.

Now, my question is on behalf of the family, who is requesting answers to questions. Mr. Hall's family also wants answers from this government. My question to the minister is: will the minister commit to providing those answers to Mr. Hall's family?

Hon. G. Abbott: I thank the member for raising his question. Mr. Hall, as I recall from the brief opportunity I had to look at the submission from the member for West Kootenay-Boundary, was one of the four cases that were cited in the letter.

Though I want, first, to say my condolences to the Hall family, I think it is far too premature for us to form conclusions about whether Mr. Hall's care needs were or were not suitably addressed. Again, I think I owe it to Mr. Hall, to Mrs. Albo and to a whole range of people to form studied conclusions about these matters, not to form them on the basis of a few minutes and a few brief notes from a critic that something was done inappropriately. I think that when we form those kind of conclusions, we invariably either do an unfairness to the family or do an unfairness to the people who work very hard every day to provide the best of care to the tens of thousands of people who need residential care in this province.

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

C. Wyse: The issue here that is in front of us isn't one resting with the caregivers. The question is around the environment within which the care is being provided and around the directions that come through the health authority and the government. Mr. Hall was transferred hours away from his community and family because the first available bed was in Grand Forks. There was no consultation with his family about the move.

My question to the minister: will he expand the investigation into the Albo tragedy to include the case of Mr. Hall and the reality that seniors, under this government's direction, are regularly forced to leave behind friends and family in order to receive the necessary care?

Hon. G. Abbott: The member says in his question that Mr. Hall's family was not consulted with respect to

the move. Now, I don't know whether that is fact or whether that is an apprehension — and perhaps a mistaken apprehension — on the part of someone. That is why we need to look into the case of Mr. Hall. We need to understand whether the protocols around transfer were observed. Mr. Hall would not be moved were his medical practitioner not satisfied that he was medically appropriate for that move. Further, in every instance, by protocol, it is the responsibility of the health authority to consult with the family to ensure that they see it as appropriate as well.

Again, I am pleased, on behalf of this member — and further to the letter I received an hour ago from the member for West Kootenay–Boundary — to look at Mr. Hall's case with the greatest of seriousness. There may well be things that we can learn from Mr. Hall's case. I'm glad to look into those, but I'm not going to form any premature conclusions about what occurred there.

[1445]

ACROPOLIS MANOR

G. Coons: This government's promise to complete the new 80-bed Acropolis Manor in Prince Rupert by 2005 has not been kept. The current facility was cut from 51 beds to 30, and now Northern Health is renovating rooms into office space. Does the Minister of Health think that the new office space for administration is more important than keeping the promise of 5,000 long-term care beds?

Hon. G. Abbott: There is no promise more important than achieving our commitment to 5,000 additional intermediate and long-term care beds for this province.

I'll have to consult the Northern Health Authority with respect to that particular facility in Prince Rupert. I don't know offhand the details about that. What I can tell the member, though, is that since we took office in 2001 some 4,900 units in this province have either been remediated or built new to add that much capacity for both assisted living and residential care. I think we're very proud of that.

What we inherited from this government back in 2001, as even the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives has noted, was a stock that was in great need of remediation. We have moved aggressively on that. I'm very proud of what we've been able to achieve to date, and I'll be even prouder of another 2,800 units that we will be completing by the end of 2006.

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

G. Coons: The people of Prince Rupert are getting tired of the minister's glib outlook towards this file. On Friday the headline in the local Prince Rupert *Daily News* read "Broken Promises Frustrate Seniors." The wait-list gets longer. Seniors are forced to look after seniors.

Interjection.

Mr. Speaker: Member.

G. Coons: Local health advocates and local seniors are tired, frustrated, and have no idea what to do. Perhaps to alleviate the concern of getting more files across his desk, will the minister commit to opening up the necessary rooms in Acropolis Manor to meet the needs of our seniors?

Hon. G. Abbott: I don't know whether this member has brought this issue to my office. I don't believe he has, but my apologies if he has. Again, I'm glad to look at these things. I'm glad to work with the Northern Health Authority to ensure that we get the outcomes that the member obviously is looking for, and that is a remarkable thing. But again, one should not form conclusions on very sketchy evidence and very hasty calls for judgment. I do think that is inappropriate.

The Northern Health Authority works very hard and, I think, has done an exceptional job in bringing what was previously a very diverse kind of balkanized approach to health care and improving it. It's hard to remember now, but when we took office, there were 52 health authorities in this province. Today there are five regional authorities, and they are all working hard to provide the very best care that they can.

REVIEW OF SENIORS CARE IN HEALTH FACILITIES

J. Kwan: Members of this House have brought case after case to the minister's attention around tragic situations in our health care system respecting seniors. I would like the minister to tell the seniors in this province: how many tragic cases does he need to have before he will expand the investigations?

Hon. G. Abbott: I'm not sure whether time is being our friend or our enemy here, but I've answered this question quite a number of times now. But I will, as I always do, patiently answer it one more time, which is that I am not going to form conclusions based on a small volume of material that was brought to my attention one hour ago. I think the people of British Columbia deserve far better than hasty, ill-informed, premature conclusions about important matters like these, when I — never mind the health authorities and the ministry — haven't even had the opportunity to have my office review these matters.

Again, I am accepting the responsibility of reviewing these with the greatest seriousness. If there are things we can learn from any of the four cases that were brought to my attention one hour ago, we will pursue them, but I am not going to form premature judgments in respect of them.

PRIVATE LODGES AND RESORTS IN PROVINCIAL PARKS

S. Simpson: We've recently learned that the Ministry of Environment has a strategy for our parks that

will allow a dramatic increase in private lodges and resorts in provincial parks. Will the minister confirm that the province is considering such a new strategy for lodges and resorts in our provincial parks that will allow private resorts of upwards of 100 beds in public parks?

[1450]

Hon. B. Penner: It's true that the Ministry of Environment is working on a policy. It's being done very carefully. It has been taking a considerable period of time. Already in British Columbia, amongst our more than 600 provincial parks, there are about 160 roofed accommodations that are available. They range from lodges to cabins to full-blown resorts, whether it's Cypress Bowl or Manning Park Resort. So it affords a range of opportunities for British Columbians to get out and enjoy some of the beautiful parks we have. There are more than 11.5 million hectares of British Columbia represented in our park system, and I think British Columbians should have the opportunity to get out and enjoy it.

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

S. Simpson: What we're talking about here is 12 to 18 of our parks, as we understand it, essentially having resorts built in them. We're talking about resorts, as we understand it, in Duffy Lake, Golden Ears, Wells Gray, Elks Lake, Mount Robson and many more. From what I understand from the material, we're talking about facilities that could include tennis courts and waterslides. All of that's available and possible there.

Interjections.

Mr. Speaker: Members.

S. Simpson: Further to that, an appointed government stewardship panel recommended against this approach and said these facilities should be built in adjacent communities. That was wise, unlike this proposal. The people of B.C. are concerned about their parks. Mostly they're concerned about the secrecy of this plan. Nobody is talking to people in communities. It's being done at the cabinet table and behind closed doors.

Will the minister withdraw this plan today and initiate a full public discussion with all British Columbians about the future of our public parks, particularly before he starts providing for private commercialized resorts in our parks? That's not the right way to go. Keep these parks public.

Hon. B. Penner: I'm a little concerned about the environment critic. We know that last week he didn't do his research properly and relied on a newspaper article for his information. Today it appears to me that he's got a convenient case of political amnesia or perhaps is suffering from a serious bout of political and

policy hypocrisy, because under the previous NDP government they approved a new lodge, a new cabin, in a provincial park near Kokanee Glacier provincial park. The critic may want to consult with the member for Nelson-Creston and ask him, "Would you prefer that we close that facility and that British Columbians not have access to that facility?" or talk to the member for Yale-Lillooet and see if the Manning Park Lodge is an inappropriate use of a provincial park.

We're developing our policy in a very careful way. We're consulting with 15 different recreation tours and with conservation and business groups. The strategy is still in progress, and we are listening to British Columbians. The policy will be unveiled at the appropriate time.

PERMIT FOR HERBICIDE SPRAYING ALONG E&N RAIL CORRIDOR

S. Fraser: Last year the Minister of Environment approved a plan that introduced the spraying of herbicides like Garlon 4 along the railway — the E&N corridor from Victoria to Courtenay and Port Alberni. I've received a copy of a letter from the Hul'qumi'num treaty group, and apparently there was no consultation on this issue that involves their traditional territory. Will the minister commit now to use his authority — no, his duty in this case — under section 8 of the act to revoke this permit?

[1455]

Hon. B. Penner: It's important to note that any of the pesticides planned to be used had to have been approved by Health Canada. In addition to that, the legislation we have in British Columbia introduces additional safeguards, and it introduced the public policy or public process. I understand that E&N dropped the use of 2,4-D that they had proposed, in response to public concerns. They've proposed, instead, a number of alternative measures including the use of non-chemical approaches — some biological approaches, natural processes.

Just exactly what happened in terms of that application is, I think, under review, but I'm certainly interested to hear more about the member's views about how we maintain the integrity of railbeds. If the integrity of railbeds is not maintained, then it is possible that public safety could be compromised.

[End of question period.]

Petitions

J. Horgan: I'd like to table a petition on behalf of residents of my community of Malahat-Juan de Fuca residing in Shirley and Otter Point, an unincorporated area to the west of the district of Sooke. Those residents are calling upon this House to recognize their democratic rights and provide an opportunity for a governance study so that they can have a municipal structure that meets their needs.

Tabling Documents

Hon. I. Chong: I have the honour to present the Public Service Benefit Plan Act annual report.

Orders of the Day

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

Budget Debate

(continued)

C. Puchmayr: As I left off on Thursday at the bewitching hour, I still had half of my debate to engage in. As I started my debate on Thursday, I acknowledged and sent best wishes to the member for Burnaby-Willingdon, who was convalescing at the time. It's great to be finishing my debate with the member for Burnaby-Willingdon back in the House. I welcome him back, and I'm pleased that he has had a good recovery.

I left off on the health care issue, and I will go back to that just slightly. One of the issues we hear often is about the '90s, and I just want to share some statistics with you with respect to health care in the '90s.

[S. Hawkins in the chair.]

Increased funding every year since 1991 — B.C. was the only province that did not cut health care funding in the '90s. The health care budget increased by almost a billion in '01 to fund new hospital equipment and training and recruitment of additional nurses and doctors. There were four new cancer clinics since 1991; best screening and mammography program in Canada; best cancer recovery rate in Canada; most comprehensive health care coverage of any province — this was in the '90s — including chiropractors, physical therapists, naturopaths, massage therapists, eye exams and podiatry.

Speaking to health care providers.... They talk about the deterioration of people, especially seniors, when they start to lose those services they used to receive under the plan. To not be able to go and have physiotherapy or chiropractic treatment has a very adverse effect on people in our society. Often the small amounts of money that are saved by not providing the service actually end up in greater costs to the system in the effects of not providing this ongoing treatment or preventive treatment.

[1500]

We often hear from the other side that we were once a have-not province. We often hear that we are now a have province. Well, if we're allegedly a have province, why do we have more have-not people? Why, under this government, do we now have the distinction of the biggest gap between rich and poor in Canada? Why, under this government, are we now number one in child poverty? We were the second-best

to Prince Edward Island in the '90s, and now we are the worst in Canada.

Why do we have so many homeless in this golden economy, and why do we have so many homeless with jobs? I know people that are couch surfing, that don't have a steady place to live, and they're working full-time — 40 hours a week. That should be unacceptable in this modern era, in this golden economy.

Why has the use of food banks increased so drastically? I was involved in the food banks in the early '80s, when we had quite a severe economic downturn, and I was volunteering as an advocate to assist people with issues in workers compensation, employment insurance and social assistance. I thought it was bad then in the early '80s. It has just multiplied, and the families that are lining up now.... Well, fortunately, the food bank in my community has decided not to have people lining up, up the sidewalk for a block on Wednesday mornings. They now have created a program where they can actually get inside out of the rain.

Some are lining up with small children. Some are couples. Some are new immigrants that are having great difficulty in finding employment. Some are new immigrants that are coming from across Canada, that are prevented from getting assistance and are suffering greatly.

We had one case come into my office where a new Canadian and his wife, who is a new immigrant and was pregnant and also had a small child, did not qualify for any assistance. They had sold all of their furniture. All they had left was a box spring and mattress. They sold their table, their chairs, their radio, their small television. It was actually the landlord that brought them in and said: "Can you help?" We sent them down for assistance, and they were written a cheque for \$2.50 to buy milk for the baby. That is the systematic, mechanical process that's put in place, and a lot of it has no leverage to even accommodate compassion.

Two years on assistance and they fall off the line, they fall off the list, and they become homeless. There doesn't seem to be anything there for them, and that is very troubling in my community and in many, many communities.

We're finding more people with mental illnesses that are becoming homeless. The frustration with going into an office and trying to go through the kiosk of applying for assistance.... I've heard of people running out of there, having panic attacks with the anxiety of trying to walk through the system, not understanding the system and not having an advocate to walk them through it. Some of those become homeless. They don't go back. They become homeless.

Seventy percent of the people with mental illness in my community that are homeless are drug addicts. They are preyed upon by drug dealers. They are victimized immediately by drug dealers. It's so easy. Give them a cigarette with crystal meth in it — one puff; they're addicted. It's that easy, and they become victims of the drug trade. They are now stealing so that the drug dealer can sell crystal meth to that person, or

they're carrying drugs for the drug dealers so the drug dealer won't get arrested.

That's a real sadness that we're seeing today. So I wonder. We talk about this golden economy and this great economy. Well, you know, not all that glitters is gold, and this golden economy does not glitter for all. Many people are worse off now under this golden economy than they were in the '90s. That is very sad.

[1505]

We have record resource prices in this province — gold, copper, oil, gas. We should never judge a society by the commodities or by the economy. We should judge a society on the balance and compassion of its people. And where does that start? It starts here. It starts in this chamber, and it filters down through policy that is fair, that is balanced and that helps people.

People that come into my office to get help with the Ministry of Children and Families or with income assistance are not these 19-year-old burly guys that could work any given day. They're people that have real issues. They're people that need an extra bit of care to assist them into moving into employment, and we don't provide that care. We don't provide that training. We don't provide that resource for them, and that's very sad to me.

I'm pleased to see that in the budget there is a crystal meth secretariat. That's a positive direction. We've been talking about a direction to head into towards addressing that serious, serious problem. I think it's very positive that we're heading in that direction, and I look forward to seeing the results of that. But without adequate detox beds and rehabilitation beds, when somebody on drugs comes out of that gutter and says, "Help me," and they are holding their hand out, that's when you have to grab them and when you have to get them help. If you don't, they are liable to fall back down again. The chances are that they may never come back up for help. So we need to be able to have proper outreach workers that can go out into the community and identify the people at risk, especially the ones that are suffering from mental illness. Reach out and get those people off the streets and get them help.

You know, we talk about the costs of rehabilitation. For every dollar spent, \$7 is saved to society. I can't stress that enough. Just to keep someone from getting HIV or full-blown AIDS, the cost of that could be over \$100,000 a year in treatment. You could send them to the Betty Ford clinic probably numerous times for that \$100,000, but we just don't invest enough in this province in order to deal with these issues.

We see some trickling — a little bit of money — for apprenticeship training. We had an excellent apprenticeship program. I believe we had the best one in Canada during the '90s, and that has gone to a system that has failed. Now we can quote Alberta. Alberta has a better apprenticeship program than us because Alberta saw the need to get people trained, to get people into those industries that were calling for them. This isn't something that just happened overnight — this trend for needing a skilled workforce.

I recall addressing a youth advisory committee meeting back in 1998 with some statistics that were just released by the federal government. I wasn't there as a youth; I was there as a city councillor. The statistics there were showing, within the next five, ten and 15 years, a huge need for skilled workers. At that time it was very difficult for young people to get employment, and right around the corner things were going to turn around, and they've turned around now. We're seeing it now. We saw it in the '90s. We saw the trend. The federal government has put out some statistics on trends that show there is an incredible need.

In this province the direction that we started to go to.... Rather than ensuring that there were adequate spaces for training, that we had a knowledge economy, that we had young people with skills, we went completely different. We started heading towards de-skilling people, saying it's okay to not be a full-fledged plumber. All you need to do is solder pipe, and all you need to do is know how to put in toilets. Well, they tried that in New Zealand, and it's been a dismal failure.

The example from that has not created decent-paying jobs. It creates things such as people that are working full-time and don't have shelter. It creates a lack of bringing revenue into the economy through the work that they generate and putting it back out into the community through being able to have a disposable asset. So there's a huge impact to that type of de-skilling of the workforce.

[1510]

The other thing that it does: these workers go somewhere else. Why would they go here when they can go to Alberta and get Red Seals in their training, full education and a decent wage?

We have people who are saying: "Well, you know, the way to resolve this issue with skilled workforce is that you simply get more people with trades to come into British Columbia." Why would people with trades come into British Columbia to work a segmented part, a residual part of that trade and get paid less, when they can go to Alberta, Ontario or Manitoba? Why would they go there?

We recently had Mexican farmworkers that came to British Columbia. They were working under a federal program. They were guaranteed \$8 an hour plus piecework, which is more than our B.C. farmworkers are given. When the employment standards code was changed, it became fully piecework. So these Mexican farmworkers went on strike because their working conditions were so poor, and they went back to Mexico, where the working conditions were better. Think about that in this province.

What kind of a message are we sending to the workforces that we're trying to get to come into Canada to pick up these trades? We're sending a message that we don't respect our workers. We won't pay them fairly, and workers are going back with that message to their countries. It's counterproductive to even.... The theory that is being put forward by some of these extreme thoughts....

Let's talk a bit about the dismal '90s again that we used to hear so much about. Children. In the dismal '90s there were lower class sizes in grades one to three. A new school was built every 19 days. There hadn't been schools built for years under the previous Social Credit government. In '91, 136,000 new spaces and 5,423 classrooms were added. Since 1998, 658 portables were removed. School lunch programs were introduced. Lowest child poverty rate again — second to P.E.I.

Advanced education in those dismal '90s. Tuition fees were cut by 5 percent in 2001 after a five-year freeze. B.C. tuition fees were 44 percent lower than Alberta, 46 percent lower than Ontario. Three new universities: Northern B.C., Royal Roads, Tech B.C. — 40,000 new post-secondary spaces since '92. Five community colleges were designated as university colleges. The participation rate in post-secondary education improved from the second-worst in Canada in '91 to second in Canada in 2001 during those dismal '90s.

Social justice and fairness. One of only two provinces that continued to build social housing — 6,500 units were completed. You remember when the federal government got out of building social housing? It used to be a 50-50 partnership between the provinces. Quebec and British Columbia continued to put the extra amounts in, and they built 6,500 units.

Pay equity laws that worked to end discrimination against women, and under this government, was the biggest cutback, the biggest severing of employment of women in the history of Canada in one swoop.

Our government finalized the Nisga'a treaty, Canada's first modern treaty. The Premier decides to go on a referendum. The Premier threatens to sue in the Supreme Court.

Deputy Speaker: Thank you, member.

C. Puchmayr: And that's my report.

B. Lekstrom: It is certainly a privilege to stand in this Legislative Assembly today to give my response to the budget speech.

I'd like to start by talking a bit about my riding of Peace River South in northeastern British Columbia. I think of it, certainly — as each and every one of my colleagues will refer to theirs, I'm sure — as the greatest spot in the province. We are truly blessed with the resources and abundance of wildlife and species but, most importantly, with the people that live in the north and call it home.

[1515]

Each of our areas, I think, are unique in their own wonderful way. I can tell you that I've lived in the north all of my life. I'm proud to be from Dawson Creek, which is my hometown. Like each and every one of my colleagues from both sides of the House, I'm sure that we didn't start out as children thinking that one day we were going to be in the Legislative Assembly representing our constituents and the people and friends that we live with to try and make our province a better place. But I can tell you that ending up here, I'm extremely proud of the position I hold on behalf of the people I

represent, not on behalf of myself. I think that's first and foremost what has to be, very importantly, pointed out.

This budget covers a lot of ground. It is a budget that I think is sound in its fiscal management approach. I think it is balanced in its approach to balancing off the needs of the people of our province, our social agenda and social needs, as well as maintaining a vibrant economy which creates our jobs and drives our ability to generate the revenue to invest in our health care, our education and our social programs.

I'm going to speak to a number of issues. I'm going to start with the services for children. We hear a great deal about that, and regardless of what political stripe you're from, children have to be first and foremost. It is of utmost importance to make sure their well-being is looked after, to make sure their needs are met, to make sure their safety is there. Each and every one of us — without question and without doubt in my heart, I believe — feels that.

This year's budget puts an additional \$421 million into the Ministry of Children and Family Development over the next four years. That's an amazing amount when you look at what's happening. Are there challenges? There most definitely are. Have there been challenges since 2001? Yes. Were there challenges through that ministry during the '90s? There were. Through the 80s? There were. It is a challenging ministry.

My hat goes off to any minister over the last number of decades that's taken on that challenge to try and make it a better ministry, run more efficiently. I think that five years from now, ten years from now we'll still be working to make it better. I hope that's each and every one of our goals: to make sure, each and every day we come to this Legislature, to make this province a better place.

In looking at the budgets, if you were to just possibly read some articles or hear some of the dialogue that takes place in here, you would think the Ministry of Children and Family Development budget was significantly less today than it was in 2001. The facts will paint a different picture. As a matter of fact, in 2001 the budget for the Ministry of Children and Family Development was \$1.553 billion. That's what we had in our budget in British Columbia. Is it enough? I'm not sure it's ever enough. But I hear about the cuts, and as a human being, I think our first instinct is to think inside: my goodness, how could you cut a ministry like that?

The reality is that the budget today and the budget that was presented for the '06 year in British Columbia has \$1.836 billion in the Ministry of Children and Family Development — nearly 300 million additional dollars from when we took office in 2001. In any way that I try and study those numbers and look at that budget, I can't see that as a cut. Have there been shifts in the delivery? Most certainly there have, and that's where the philosophical difference comes from both sides of this House.

You know, there are a number of issues that we obviously have differences on. That's why in a free democracy we elect people from different beliefs. The ideas that some share aren't what others share. The idea that the government shares apparently is not what the opposition shares, and I think that's democracy. I

also believe that when we look at politics, I've yet to hear....

Although on occasion I've heard a couple of the opposition members speak about, "In this budget I was happy to see this," more often than not I've heard about what a terrible budget it is from the opposition. I've yet to hear how they would spend the \$34 billion, but we all want the same thing. There's no doubt. And that's to make our province even better, because we live in the best province in this country, and we live in the best country in the world. So as good as it is today, it's our job to make it better.

That \$421 million — where will it go? Well, \$72 million is going to add more social workers and other front-line staff — something we've heard a need for. We've listened. We've actually planned. We didn't listen over the last two months or three months or four months, because the opposition has brought forward some of the ideas, saying: "We've messed it up, now you have to fix it." We've been building on this since 2001.

Can we learn from each other? I think that most definitely we can. I would love to get to a point, and we're not there yet, where a government can present a bill or a piece of legislation, and the opposition can actually get up and speak to it, talk about what's good in that bill and actually add some issues that they think may have been overlooked. If it's good, the governments could actually take that and say: "You know, we hadn't thought of that."

[1520]

One day I think we're going to get there. I think we're doing a better job of it. I think you see the attitude and the way we operate in this Legislative Assembly. It's come a long way. I think we have a long way to go yet, so that's what keeps me coming back, most definitely.

The money we're spending. We also have \$100 million to enhance the child protection system, something we talk about quite regularly in here, because children, as I indicated earlier, are important to each and every one of us, regardless of what political party you're with. We have \$34 million to increase funding for phase two of the child and youth mental health plan — again, something we talk a lot about.

Although we talk about money and figures in this budget, it's important in how we implement and execute the plans and in our actual fiscal plans we have that the ministry plans for how that money is going to be put forward, how it's going to be spent. I'll get to it a little further in my speech, but it's clear to me that sometimes all the money in the world doesn't fix a problem, and we face that significantly in health care.

There's also an additional \$31 million to implement five regional aboriginal child and family development service authorities — something our government has worked toward, something the first nations have asked for. We continue to work towards that goal. Under services for children, there's an additional \$421 million, bringing the total budget to \$1.836 billion.

Is that going to work? I think it's going to work. Can we improve on it? Most certainly. Does it mean we need more money? Again, I think that's an open-ended

question. When is enough, enough? Is there ever enough?

Under the balance that we have and the money that is brought into British Columbia through our resource sector and how we generate revenue, the balance, for our government, is to find out how to expend it and how to deliver the best programs to the most people in British Columbia and to those most affected, those most vulnerable and to do it in a way that is sustainable, and that is a key word.

Skills development and training. It's something that's very near and dear to my heart. I have a history in that. My father was an instructor at Northern Lights College. My brother followed in his footsteps. Both of them were welders. My brother now works with Northern Lights College. It's a challenge. I think we're doing a wonderful job.

We hear the differences between ITAC and the ITA and how many apprentices were going into the system and how many are leaving. Madam Speaker, I'm going to give you some numbers. I'll speak to my area in the north. It's moving ahead very well. I think that we can talk about what took place in the '90s, we can talk about what took place in the '80s, but today we're in 2006. We can't change yesterday. We can fix today and work towards tomorrow, and we're going to do that.

Here's what we're going to do. In August of 2003 in Northern Lights College we had 524 apprentices registered in our college region — not a bad number, I thought, when I looked at that in 2003. But I'll go back. The last numbers I pulled up were in September of '05. We had 891 apprentices registered in our college system. That's an increase of 59 percent in just over two years. That's pretty significant.

When you look at the dual-credit program that's taking place now with our grades 11 and 12 students working at entry-level trades training, it's amazing what's taking place. We used to have students.... We worried with our graduation rates, and I still think we have some work to do there.

Students — once they hit late grade ten or grade 11, if they were going to go out and thought they were going to be a carpenter, a welder, a pipefitter or a plumber — any of an array of trades and apprenticeships.... Many of them left school early. They didn't stay to finish their grades 11 and 12, which was really a tragedy, because at very minimum I think our students need a grade 12 in today's society. We're seeing more and more of our students stay for grades 11 and 12 and complete their grade 12 diplomas, for the simple fact that they have the ability to move forward into these entry-level trades training positions through the dual-credit program. That's quite amazing, and it's something I'm very proud of.

Equally proud should be the people of school district 59, the area I represent. I also represent school district 60, which works in this. We're leaders in this field and have been at it for a good number of years, so I congratulate each and every one of those people.

The de-skilling we talk about, I think, is something of a red herring. A carpenter, for example, wants to go

out and knows that he's not ever going to be a full-fledged carpenter and doesn't want to be. But you know what? He wants to be a framer, and that seems to be the one that I hear about. He wants to be a framer, but he doesn't want to be a cabinet builder. He doesn't want to move through the full four-year trade. To be that, he should have that choice.

[1525]

It doesn't mean that the person who wants to take the four-year apprenticeship — to go through it and be the full-fledged carpenter — should be excluded from that right. He has that right. What we have, if you look at it — and I've used this before in this House — is that it isn't really de-skilling. If you look at a welder, you can go in and take a C-ticket, a B-ticket, a pressure ticket. I don't consider a welder with a C-ticket to be de-skilled. I consider that's what his choice is. As he chooses to progress in that field, he's going to go back and upgrade, and upgrade at his wish — not at the wish of somebody else, but at the wish of the individual. I think that's very important.

The Red Seal. I heard the previous speaker speak about that briefly. The Red Seal is a national certification. We've made no alterations to the Red Seal program, nor could we as a province. I think it's a valuable interjurisdictional certificate that allows — I'll use a plumber — to be certified in British Columbia, but if he wants to practice his trade across this country he needs to write a Red Seal certification. Not one thing has changed in that. That's a very valuable thing, the Red Seal certificate. Many, many people take it up. Many people don't. The people that don't want to work interjurisdictionally or province-to-province but who just want to practice their trade here don't become Red Seal-certified.

Moving on, I want to speak — I know my time is limited — on the tax reductions that took place in this budget. They amount to \$733 million over four years, and I think that's a pretty impressive amount of money. Now, many people would have you believe that this all went to the rich and to the corporations, but the true reality is that two-thirds of that \$733 million over four years went to families. One-third went to business to make sure that they remained competitive, because they truly are the people that create the jobs to generate the opportunities for ourselves, our children and our grandchildren — although I have no grandchildren yet, and I'm happy to wait for that.

It's quite amazing. There are challenges out there. There will always be challenges, regardless of who the government is or what the year is. I don't think that in my lifetime I'm probably going to see everybody here, regardless of what political party they are with, saying: "We aren't even going to run to become government, because we think you're doing such a good job." That's just not how politics works. We all have our own ideas. We all try and move our agendas ahead.

The homeowner's grant. We increased the basic homeowner's grant by 22 percent. We increased it to \$570 from \$470, which I think is something that affects every single homeowner in British Columbia. We also

increased the threshold to \$780,000. In my area we don't have many \$780,000 homes — not for the lack of people wanting, I'm sure, but the reality is that the way houses are priced in our province, ours have gone up substantially. We're seeing some tremendous increases in our real estate prices.

I think the whole push this was for was for the people.... I'll speak to the seniors we hear so much about. They've grown up in Vancouver. They purchased a home, possibly in the interior or on the Island, and they've seen their house values go from \$100,000 to \$300,000 to \$500,000 to \$700,000 to more than they could have ever imagined, so the taxes that we pay to our municipalities have a dramatic impact on them.

In order to help accommodate those seniors, and all of us in general, to keep their homes, to stay in the homes they've raised their children in, have grown up in — truly, it is their home — we've raised it to \$780,000. I can tell you that I've had people in my constituency say: "My goodness, you're doing this for the rich." This isn't for the rich. This is for the average person out there who is seeing their prices and their real estate values skyrocket.

That's a good thing, but on the down side of it is something we have to address. That's trying to be able to adjust the homeowner's grant so that they can reap some additional revenue from the province to help them maintain their home. It cannot get any more important than that.

I read with great interest an article in the February 22 *Times Colonist*, I believe it was, where Jim Sinclair, president of the B.C. Federation of Labour, had made a comment that unless you own a house over \$780,000 or plan to buy a \$55,000 car or your kids go to private school, you're no further ahead. You know, I've known Jim for a number of years, and I have to believe that possibly he just hadn't read the full budget yet and didn't understand this, because that just isn't true.

That's a big problem with politics. I'll speak to this province, but it may be right across the country. People go out and say things that, actually, an average British Columbian would read and go: "My goodness, I'll never be able to afford a \$780,000 house, so what's this government doing?" Well, the government actually is helping everybody that owns a home. The reality was that this was confused, and it's unfortunate that stuff like this gets printed, because then people come and question us — both sides of the House. It's important to clear things like that up, Madam Speaker.

[1530]

The luxury surtax on vehicles. It's interesting that we call it a luxury surtax. I'll speak to it from a northern perspective. We've raised it from \$49,000 to \$55,000. Again, Mr. Sinclair thought that was outrageous, if I interpret his comments right. I would think that many of the members he represents drive vehicles at \$55,000 or greater, particularly in my area.

These are vehicles that people use to go to and from their home in the country. They're vehicles that people use in the oil patch or in the mining industry. Agriculture uses them. So it isn't something that is for the elite.

This is the reality of the world we live in. I'm going to get to our Finance Committee report, but it's certainly something we recommended, or a portion thereof, and I was happy to see it in this budget.

Communities will see an additional \$191 million over three years. Again, we're here to make our province, our communities, a better place and to have a better place to raise our children, and I think we're doing that.

Our resources and sustainable development are something that I work around every day in my riding, like each and every one of you. Just because you're in a rural area doesn't mean that's the only area that deals with resources. Downtown Vancouver is driven by the resources that are extracted from rural British Columbia. We have many thousands — thousands upon thousands of people and families — that are dependent on the resource industry and that live in Vancouver, Victoria, the interior, the Kootenays, and we should all be proud of our resource sector.

I think we do one of the best jobs of anyone in the world of extracting our resources in a sustainable manner. Certainly, if you look at forestry, which truly, in my mind, is the most sustainable resource on the planet — you cut a tree; you plant a tree — we have a great, great future ahead of us here.

The key in the resource and sustainable development issue that I want to speak on is that over four years we're going to see \$312 million invested in that. Of that, a key issue for me, and something I work on day in and day out, is \$125 million for oil and gas roads. Our roads in the northeast part of our province have always been an issue, as long as I've lived there. They were built 50, 60, 70 years ago to accommodate mostly agricultural traffic. You can't compare it to what we see today, whether it's our swathers or our combines — the equipment in the agriculture sector that we move around up there on the roads. The weights have changed. The oil and gas industry, the equipment they're moving — the traffic is phenomenal.

Having been there all of my life, I can tell you that you drive up and down our highways today, and it really is amazing, in a good way. But in that good way and with the traffic come concerns for people — concerns about being able to turn off the highway into your farmyard on a highway that was relatively busy but that is now exceptionally busy.

An additional \$125 million will help us upgrade our rural road infrastructure so that our school buses can move around, so that our families can get to and from their homes, so that the oil and gas industry and the mining industry can move, extract the resources, bring them to market and create jobs.

I know that the people in Peace River South as well as Peace River North are going to benefit from this. And we're going to benefit in the way that is going to help build our infrastructure. I can tell you that without a sound infrastructure in a province, your economic ability to generate revenue is lost.

Tourism is another one. We're going to see \$50 million invested in tourism in British Columbia. That's on

top of the money we've already put in. We've put forward \$25 million to the Union of B.C. Municipalities to work on behalf of their communities. Again, partnerships are what it's about. Can government do it by itself? I don't think so. Can we do it together as British Columbians? Yes, we can.

Infrastructure in our province. We talk about the debt, which I think is very important. Some people have raised the issue that more money should have gone to debt repayment. It shouldn't have gone to wages, I've heard. Or I've heard that more money should have gone to wages and less over to taxes. That's the balance we all talk about when we speak to this budget.

Infrastructure in education — we're going to see \$3.4 billion invested in infrastructure for K-to-12 and the post-secondary education system in our province. Those are amazing numbers. That's to help create the 25,000 additional new spaces. That's to build new schools that we hear about. Certainly, I live in an area — school district 59, which I'll speak to — that doesn't see an increase in the student population, but there are areas in this province that do. When that happens, we'll see new schools built. We'll see the ability to provide for those students.

[1535]

All right. Another \$1.8 billion is going to be invested over three years for our health infrastructure — again, good news. "Can it be better?" we hear all the time. We hear questions in question period.

We certainly talk amongst ourselves. It's interesting. Many people and many of my friends at home think that because you're on this side of the House, you must never talk to that side of the House because they're from a different political party. For the most part, Madam Speaker, I can tell you that I think it's fair to say that we're pretty much all friends. We're friends with different ideas on how we're going to get to the end result, which is to make our province the best place. I'm proud to call my colleagues on both sides of the House friends. We have some great debates. It doesn't mean that we leave at end of the day agreeing, but we have some great debates.

I want to speak for a moment on health care in general, which is something that is an issue in British Columbia. It's an issue in our country, and it's really an issue right around the world. We've increased to an additional \$301 million from the September budget update into this year's budget, meaning nearly two billion additional dollars will be added to health care over the next three years. To date, since 2001, we have injected an additional — an additional, Madam Speaker — \$10 billion into health care. That's a lot of money. Ten thousand million dollars is what that is. I explained it to some of my friends that way. They think it's a little difficult to understand those numbers.

But when I ask people, "Is health care better today than it was in 2001?" I get mixed answers. I get some people saying: "You know, I think it is." I get others saying: "You know, we've got problems still on the seniors side of things."

I hear quite a bit on acute care, on our waiting lists. We're doing more surgeries, yet our lists continue to grow, because, I think, health care is growing at a pace so quickly, and our technological advancements are increasing. We're doing far more surgeries. Our ability to help people is far greater than at any time in our history. Along with that ability comes a challenge of finding that balance to make sure that we can look after those with acute care needs, with long-term care needs, with assisted-living needs.

I'm a big supporter of the seniors care model that we've implemented, which is home support, assisted living, complex care. I think that transitional model is a wonderful one. Do I think we still have some issues that we have to address? Yes. I don't think the system will ever be perfect. I go back to that time and time again, because to be honest, if we ever reach the day when it is perfect, there's no need for any one of us as legislators to be here. So I think we'll always have the ability to elect our legislators, because there'll always be room to improve.

Health care. An additional \$10 billion since 2001 tells me that we have to have a fundamental look at what we're doing in health care. We have some of the best health professionals in the entire world working right here in British Columbia, and they have some wonderful ideas.

In the throne speech, as we talked about, we're going to go out and talk to British Columbians. We're going to find out what they believe should take place, because — and I'm not here to scare people; I'm not here to blame anybody from our side or from the previous side — if we continue delivering health care the way we have over the last 20 years and think that just putting more money into that system is going to make it better, I think we're dreaming. As much as I would like that to happen and be the reality, it's not.

There's a reality that we have to — as British Columbians, I believe — be leaders in this world and make some difficult choices so that the health care that British Columbians want and deserve can be delivered in our lifetime, in our children's lifetime, in our grandchildren's lifetime and can be sustainable so that we can receive the best health care of any jurisdiction on the continent and in the world.

Education, again, is another issue that I think we can all probably reach a fundamental agreement on, and that is that we want to be the best-educated jurisdiction in North America. We want to have the best education system in the world, because it's about our children. I managed to go through an education system, and graduated many years ago, that I'm very proud to have come out of. I had wonderful teachers who are friends today, although we've had our debates lately on some issues that we've gone through as legislators. But they're friends, and you sit there and you go through it.

It's not unlike when I went through school. Our children today are going through school. I have children in school who are developing friendships with their friends but who are also developing friendships

with their teachers, the people who deliver the education to our students.

[1540]

Can we improve our education system? I believe we can. I think we've done a great job since 2001. I'm not here to point a finger. I haven't in the past blamed people for the past. I can't change yesterday. I can't change the '90s or the '80s or the '70s. But I can tell you that I'm going to work as hard as I can to make sure that the future is one that all of us can look forward to, including our children and our grandchildren.

In education we've added an additional \$112 million since the September update, for a total of 437 million new dollars over the next three years in education. That's again a significant number. All of these numbers are not including the actual negotiating mandate, which is important to recognize, because that's an additional \$6 billion. I'll speak to that briefly here in a few moments.

Balanced budgets are very important, I think we would all agree. I think there's a time to incur debt — a time to incur debt when you want to build hospitals and schools and roads, but you don't incur debt to run the day-to-day operations of a province. We don't do it. We don't go borrow money to buy the groceries, or pretty soon the banker's knocking on your door, saying: "You've missed a payment on your house."

I'm proud of what we've been able to accomplish fiscally and socially in this province. Our budget this year is \$33.914 billion. That's a lot of money to spend. If we're going to spend that, at the very minimum you have to believe that you can bring in \$33.914 billion, or what you've done is instituted programs that may last for one year but in the long run will face some devastating consequences, because you can't afford them.

I believe, and I've said this when I spoke to budgets in the past, through the 1990s when we saw some issues fiscally within our province not go as well as, I think, most British Columbians felt.... I don't think we had a bunch of bad people that were really trying to do this. I think there were a number of issues. I've said it before, and I say it to my friends, and I say it to my colleagues: I think we dealt with an administration that had bigger hearts than bank accounts. They couldn't fund some of the programs they wanted, as much as I believe they wanted to. But there's a reality that if we went down that path — and we were definitely headed there through the '90s — it was time to pay the piper. We reached a brick wall.

In 2001 when the people of British Columbia elected our government to come forward, they asked us pretty much a pretty straightforward question and asked for the answer to be: get our financial house back in order so we can deliver the programs that we all want for ourselves, our families and our children. I think we've done that, not without challenges and not without, I believe, the odd time where you make a decision and — you know what? — it may not have been the right decision.

I think the sign of a good government is to be able to say: "You know, we made some changes, because

what we were doing through the 1990s wasn't working. You know what? What we've tried hasn't worked the way we thought it would, so we're going to try something different." That's the sign of good government. I'm proud to be part of a government that can do that, and we have done that.

I want to speak now to the negotiating framework that we talk about in British Columbia. Public sector wages and collective agreements are up. March 31 we're going to see 90 percent of the employees have their contracts expire, and \$6 billion is on the table. The single largest wage mandate in the history of this province, and in some cases I hear: "It's way too much. What are you doing giving that much away? Take \$2 billion and put it on debt, and put \$4 billion on the public sector."

Well, I believe \$6 billion is a fair number, and I'll stand up and discuss that with anybody. I think it's fair because our public sector employees are a big reason we were able to turn our province around. They helped a great deal — zero-zero-and-zero is a tough wage mandate to accept. I certainly appreciate what they put in. It doesn't mean I agree with them all the time, but \$6 billion is a fair and reasonable amount to reach a settlement.

I'm quickly running out of time, but it's been a privilege to serve on the Finance Committee of this Legislative Assembly. We put forward a number of recommendations to the Finance Minister as one tool that she would use in the development of this budget. I'm happy to say that she acted on a good number of those.

In our budget we have addressed children and youth with special needs, a vehicle surtax threshold, training tax credits. We have the mountain pine beetle account increased substantially, and fair and reasonable wage guidelines with the \$6 billion that I just talked about.

As my colleagues on the other side of the House and my colleagues....

Deputy Speaker: Thank you, member.

B. Lekstrom: I see my time is up. In closing, I want to thank the members of this House for allowing me the opportunity. I want to thank the people I represent in Peace River South. It's truly a privilege to serve.

[1545]

M. Karagianis: I stand here today to speak on the budget, much as I did back in September, and not surprisingly, my communities have the same needs and hopes from this government that they had then. My community still needs better emergency access to health care at Victoria General Hospital. We still need more home care options for seniors and more complex care beds in our community.

I have been quite outspoken about my views on the failed privatization of food services and cleaning services in health facilities in the region, and last year I actually called for a full audit of those services. It's un-

fortunate that the Minister of Health is not here, because I would in fact like to offer my thanks that the minister has finally embarked on that audit. I look forward to hearing the results, and I hope that the government can find better ways to deliver food, can put more common sense into a plan for change and can make sure that recovering patients are properly fed in this province.

I see that this government is still pushing ahead with privatization. The Premier's junket to Europe — now becoming more famous by the day — with his brother-in-law, a very outspoken proponent of two-tiered medicine, is a clear indication that this government will continue to push for more private health care regardless of the objectives and objections of communities all over British Columbia. This is a frivolous endeavour and completely unnecessary in my view.

In fact, we have a perfect solution for ensuring our public health care system functions better and delivers far into the future, and that is the Romanow report. Based on one of the most comprehensive consultation processes ever undertaken in this country, Romanow lays out a sensible and sustainable list of solutions to keep our health care challenges in public hands and gives us a plan that will keep the health care system healthy itself far into the future.

Affordable housing is another real and urgent issue in my riding. The rental supplement program that the government is talking about offering is a great solution, but completely useless if there's no place to rent. The reality in the capital region here is that there is very little in the way of rental space available. In fact, no developers are building rental housing. When is the last time anybody saw a developer actually build rental housing? Instead, rental properties are now being converted into condominiums for sale in this very lucrative real estate market. With the dramatic rise in real estate values, this situation will not change unless government provides real programs and options to create affordable housing stock.

There's nothing in this budget that provides real solutions to the housing crisis or makes it possible for many working families in this area to even think about owning a house. The community council here in Victoria has documented the reality that more and more working families are spending up to 50 percent of their income on housing needs, and their low-paying jobs are putting home-ownership more and more out of reach.

The issue of child poverty goes hand in hand with this problem, and in my riding the statistics are very grim. We in fact epitomize the 24 percent of children living in poverty in this province, and those are families living in poverty. I'm disappointed that this budget did not offer any plans or solutions to that unfortunate reality.

The growing homeless population also now includes families. Fifty families in the capital region, here in the capital city, are now homeless. There are growing numbers of homeless in areas outside the urban centres — Duncan, Nanaimo. They are a tragic and

vivid example of what will happen with government cuts and negligence in looking after more vulnerable members of our society.

Crystal meth continues to be a dominant issue. We heard about it in the budget speech — one of the most pressing social issues we have. I'm happy to see that government has taken the advice to create a central agency to coordinate efforts to combat this problem, but realistically, we need more treatment spaces, and we need more treatment options. I did not see money in the budget for that.

Five or six beds on Vancouver Island are not sufficient. We need more beds, and we need, beyond that, some kind of housing option. The reality is that a 14-day treatment is not going to get a crystal meth addict back on their feet. In fact, they need housing options. They need a long-term plan that goes far beyond the normal 14-day treatment. I didn't see any of that here for the communities in my riding.

[1550]

Several of my constituencies are still growing at lightning speed, and literally thousands of new homes are being built now and over the coming few years. The growing pressures for transportation solutions are very well documented. Every time there's a crash on the Malahat or gridlock in the morning commute, we are reminded of the need for light rapid transit, expanded bus service and better transportation planning. This budget offers nothing for those needs in my constituency or that of my neighbour in Malahat-Juan de Fuca. My constituents want that issue looked after.

Day care remains a big challenge for working parents, and in my riding that's everybody. So the new federal government offer of \$100 a month does not begin to provide real help to those families when what they really need are day care spaces. The Premier has refused to stand up and fight for the day care program from Ottawa to be kept here in this province, and so we have no security for our working families for the future of day care spaces.

It is still a commonly held view in Esquimalt-Metchosin that government is spending their money on the Vancouver Convention Centre, the RAV line, the Olympics highway and other projects specific to the lower mainland.

Yet another really glaring omission from the budget speech was the hype about 2010. I would have thought in the midst of the Turin Olympics that we would have seen government waving the banner a little more vigorously than before. Maybe the cost overruns have dampened their spirit on that, but I am glad to see that the press is picking up the banner, and they're talking more about the celebration of what's coming in 2010.

It's difficult not to be skeptical about this government putting any real value into the needs of my community. The facts continue to speak for themselves. The government budget outlines the government's priorities, and Island communities like Esquimalt-Metchosin are not on that list.

In Esquimalt-Metchosin we need to expand our hospital and ensure that staff are well paid and well

trained. We need clean and safe hospitals, and we need good food. We need to relieve hospital emergency wards, and we need to manage the system better. Those are our priorities.

We need two new secondary schools in the Western Communities, and we need smaller class sizes overall. We need more tuition relief for our young people so that they can pursue their dreams of a further education. Those are our priorities.

We need seniors complex care, and we need affordable housing for families. We need solutions to child poverty, and we need more day care spaces. Those are our urgent priorities.

We need transportation solutions, and we need alternative options — expanded transit and light commuter rail. Those are real priorities for my constituents. Are those the priorities of this government in the budget that we heard about? No. In fact, it's pretty evident to me that the government does not reflect the priorities of my community.

Today I want to ask another question of the government. Where is the promised prosperity for communities? Where is the golden decade we continue to hear about? A recent poll done after the budget was delivered the other day found that more than half of British Columbians felt they were no better off under the booming economy and that the boom is accidental and not due in any way to government management. That means this budget missed the mark all around and this government is not even reflecting the real priorities of British Columbians anywhere.

There is a better way of investing in the province. I think that government can invest in its people, can invest in its communities, can preserve and invest in its resources so that those communities can thrive and prosper so that there's a legacy for the coming generations. It can invest in and strengthen its social contract with its citizens to ensure that children do not live in poverty and that the vulnerable are cared for in a compassionate society. It can show leadership in solving the growing challenges for business in securing a workforce and ensuring that they are well trained and well paid. It can show leadership and long-term vision for ensuring that our young people are well educated and able to participate fully in the economies of the future. A good government can balance the needs of its constituents and ensure that services and resources benefit everyone in B.C.

[1555]

While we are living in boom times with a great economy and before the cyclical change strikes again, we could be investing in our communities. We could be investing in all of those needs, and we do not have to shortchange ourselves, business or the future of this province to do so. We are growing the largest debt ever in the history of this province. If we are not seeing tangible results in our communities of what that debt is bringing us, then what value is there? What priorities does government have for all those people in our communities? I think that my community wants and

deserves better. I think that all of British Columbia wants and deserves better.

Hon. P. Bell: I can tell you it's a real privilege for me to speak to my seventh budget in this House. It doesn't seem like that long ago that I stood up to respond to my first-ever budget, so to be here on this day and respond to my seventh budget is, I think, pretty significant, and it's exciting. It has told the story through those seven budgets that really has indicated the dynamic changes of the economy of British Columbia. I was interested listening to the last speaker, because they spoke of the cycles of British Columbia — the economic cycles and how they change.

It just struck me as the speaker was speaking that the cycles seem to resemble the electoral cycles in the province. Typically, when the NDP are in power, it's usually the bottom of the cycle and terrible economic times. When there's a good, solid, free enterprise government in place, you see economic growth, reduced unemployment, really a dynamic change in the economy and investment in the province.

I just wonder: is there a linkage there, or not? Perhaps this is just an odd coincidence that through the '72 to '75 period, we saw real economic downturns in the province, and that was part of the cycle, and from 1991 to 2001, when the rest of the world was booming — arguably the strongest economic time ever in the world — we saw an economic downturn that was unprecedented in the province with 17-percent or 18-percent unemployment.

I'm not sure whether it was actually the economy that was chasing the government or the government that was chasing the economy. But having spent some very, very interesting time through these last seven budgets, I can tell you that I've come to the conclusion that strong policy decisions, taxation reform and the right regulatory changes in the province really do drive economic change. It's amazing how we're seeing that start to coincide at this particular point and, specifically, over the last couple of years.

[S. Hammell in the chair.]

I want to spend a few minutes talking about the different components of this ministry and the vision for this ministry, going forward over the next number of years. It really has a couple of different components to the ministry, both agriculture and lands. I'll start out and focus my comments on agriculture.

It's an incredibly exciting time to be involved in agriculture right now, and I can tell you that there have been some very, very real and positive changes in agriculture. Certainly, I would like to credit the previous minister, the now Minister of State for Intergovernmental Relations, for the fine work that he did through the early part of the 21st century, because the results speak for themselves. The policy changes, the decisions and the direction that the minister took agriculture through the early part of the 21st century yielded some very, very real and positive benefits.

Let me just give you some of the statistics, because I think they're relevant. In 2004 B.C. farm cash income, which is receipts minus operating expenses, was up 26 percent over 2003. In 2005 it was up a further 10 percent over 2004, a combined two-year total of 36 percent. How does that compare to the rest of Canada? It's worth looking at the rest of Canada, because oftentimes we're driven by this jargon from the opposition benches of: "Oh, it's just part of commodity prices." Well, the average net-cash income for Canadian farmers is forecast to decrease 2 percent in the rest of Canada versus a 10-percent increase. Certainly, I would credit the good decision-making and the fine policy work that the minister of the day put in place, and it yielded benefits and results.

[1600]

Now I'm not sure how the opposition would argue that that's not the case, but typically we hear that. We hear lots of things — "Oh, it's just a commodity-price impact," or: "It's a cycle." As I said, it seems like most of the cycles seem to follow when the opposition is in government.

There have been some very, very real and demonstrated benefits over the last number of years in terms of what's going on in agriculture. I think we need to continue to drive that, because the future is very bright around agriculture. What I know, coming from the central interior part of the province, is this: the economy of rural British Columbia only remains strong when you have all of the resource industries working collectively to have that strong economy.

We need to make sure that agriculture works hand in hand with forestry, with energy, with mining to benefit all of rural British Columbia. When you look at the communities that have had a rich agricultural history, clearly you know that the economies of those regions are far more stable. Agriculture can have a stabilizing effect. It can have an effect that ensures that the economy has that ongoing, sustainable resilience, particularly in rural British Columbia.

Where do we want to take agriculture going forward over the next number of years? We're really trying to make four key shifts in the Ministry of Agriculture in order to stimulate growth with the ongoing impact of what's happening with the World Trade Organization and the shifts that are happening in the world marketplace.

The first and really key and significant activity that we're trying to move forward is the notion of making land more accessible to the agricultural community. As I went through my travels last summer and was out in the communities talking to different farmers and ranchers — the number-one issue they presented every time was: "We need access to land if we're going to be successful in our business operations. We need to make sure that we have appropriate forms of tenure."

The Minister of Forests and Range has been very proactive in that matter, and he has a number of people working on ensuring that we have the right models of tenure. We're going to continue to work within the Ministry of Agriculture and Lands to do that. We need

to make sure that we have land available to our farmers and our ranchers in an economic way that allows them to engage in the industry and be profitable.

The second key shift we're making is that we need to find ways of making capital accessible to farmers and ranchers. Again, the number-two point that I heard in my travels throughout the communities last summer was the need to have cash available to farmers and ranchers on an economic basis, not with government handouts, not with government-subsidized loans, but in a way that brings the disciplines of the private sector into agriculture. They have that expectation. They understand that they're accountable to the organizations and institutions that are willing to lend them money.

The third key piece — and I think this is really important — is the notion that we need to get back into the extension business. We need to make sure that we provide services in our agricultural community so that if they're not an agrologist, a biologist, a veterinarian or an accountant, or they don't have marketing expertise, we can help support those endeavours within the agricultural industry.

Many of our operations are small-lot agriculture. There are a lot of small operators that simply don't have the capacity to fill all those needs — to be an accountant, an agrologist and so on. I think it's important that we get back in the extension service business and back in the research and development business. We're going to be bringing some things forward over the next year that I think will be helpful to the agricultural community and really give them the resources they need to be successful.

I think the fourth key point that we're trying to re-focus on is the need to bridge what I have coined the urban-agriculture divide. Agricultural B.C. and urban B.C. are continuing to conflict in many ways. The accepted farm practices in our agriculture area, the positive farm practices are oftentimes.... People in urban B.C. find those offensive. We need to find ways to bridge into urban British Columbia and make sure that urban British Columbia understands the benefits of a successful and thriving agriculture industry.

That's not easy. We've got some exciting opportunities. We have a fair and exhibition circuit in this province. I think there are 48 different fairs and exhibitions around the province. We have a very well organized 4-H organization in the province that we need to continue to support. There are many different activities that I think we can do to start marketing our industry back out into the general B.C. public. We need to work towards developing that further. B.C. has an incredible agriculture sector, and one of the reasons why we are so successful is because of the diversity in the sector that we have. There is just a wide array and variety — about 200 different products that we produce commercially.

[1605]

We're going to have a little pop quiz. Everyone at home: I want you to make sure you try and answer this quiz. What do you think, Madam Speaker, would be

the second-most dominant product that we produce here in our agricultural crops in British Columbia? I'm willing to listen. No, it's not wine. I'm willing to listen here. Come on. This is a pop quiz.

An Hon. Member: Marijuana?

Hon. P. Bell: No, that would be our first. The member notes marijuana. That wouldn't fall in the category of the statistics we keep. There must be other options here. Come forward with your suggestions. What would be the second-largest crop that we cultivate here in British Columbia?

Interjections.

Hon. P. Bell: Not canola; not potatoes; not ginseng. The ex-Speaker of the House, now a minister, says tulips. The minister's actually right. It's actually flowers. In 2004 in the province of British Columbia we had farm-gate receipts of \$303 million worth of flowers in the province. Think of the employment that is driven by that, the investment that's driven by that — clearly, a huge crop for the province and a very profitable crop.

But we extend out to tomatoes. We produce \$156 million worth of tomatoes. Nursery products, a product that we typically ship into the U.S., with the thriving housing market: \$155 million. Cattle is \$154 million. Sweet peppers: \$72 million. I can go on and on and on, all the way down to sod — turf we put on our lawns — with about \$7 million worth of farm-gate sales. So we have a very, very diverse industry, a very diverse sector. That's what's allowed us to be profitable. We're going to continue to focus on that, because that's important.

I want to talk for a couple of seconds about the agricultural land reserve, because there has been a past Premier of this province running around suggesting that this government is tearing apart the agricultural land reserve. That just is patently false. There's just no question about it. If you look at the history of the agricultural land reserve in this province, there is more land protected in the ALR today than there was in its inception in 1973. Further to that, if you take a look, since we have come to office, there has been an average amount of land coming out of the land reserve that represents half of what came out through the entire 1990s — at about 1,300 to 1,400 hectares per year.

So we are in fact protecting land in the reserve. We are ensuring that we have an agricultural land base that works for our farming and ranching sectors, and we're going to continue to do that. I'll tell you what we won't do. We won't interfere with the Agricultural Land Commission like the previous government did. We won't suggest that we would overrule the Agricultural Land Commission in a decision around whether a piece of property should be a golf course or not.

We believe in establishing the policy framework for the Agricultural Land Commission to do what it needs to do and allow them to do their business. It's totally inappropriate that any government should engage in

that sort of activity of actually overruling the Agricultural Land Commission, or why would you have the ALC in the first place?

I want to move on a bit because time is short and I know there are many other speakers that want to talk. I want to talk a little bit about the land management in the province, because that's the other key piece of this ministry. A number of weeks ago we rolled out the land use plan for the north coast-central coast, commonly referred to in the environmental community as the Great Bear rain forest. What an exciting thing for this government to be able to participate in. And give the opposition its due. The process for the central coast land use plan actually started in the latter part of the 1990s. There were three ministers on the file through the 1990s, three more ministers in the 21st century.

This is a 6.4 million-hectare planning area. That's about twice the size of Vancouver Island. Previously there was a protected area of about 600,000 hectares in this particular planning area. We've increased that to 1.8 million hectares of protected area. That's about triple the amount of protected area. It's about three times the size of Prince Edward Island, to give it some perspective — the amount of area that's been protected.

[1610]

Probably most importantly about all of this, we've protected the key habitat area for the spirit bear, the kermode bear.

There are an estimated 150 to 200 bears in existence, the vast majority of them here in British Columbia, the vast majority of them on the central coast and into the north coast. It's truly an animal that is important to our heritage in the province, important to our first nations in the province. I think our ability to actually protect that key habitat forevermore and allow the spirit bear to thrive is very exciting. I'm proud to be the minister that was engaged and involved in that process.

You know, when you look at the work that was done, Madam Speaker, it is just exceptional. I have to congratulate a number of individuals in the ministry who were able to carry this process through, but none more so than Gordon Goodman, who was a key player on behalf of the ministry in pushing the ball over the finish line on the north and central coast. This gentleman was able to bring together — and I think it is important to put this in context — environmental organizations from all over British Columbia: Greenpeace, ForestEthics, the Sierra Club of Canada.

He was able to bring together industry. He was able to bring together 25 different first nations, local governments and the provincial government to agree on a document and an outline for the north coast and central coast. I think that is just unprecedented. I think we're very fortunate to have an individual like Gord Goodman on the team, and we certainly hope to put him to work in many other ways over the coming years.

The north coast-central coast area is, I think, probably one of the most significant ecological accomplishments that this government will have. It certainly has protected a significant area and really will allow

business to get back into the region and start to operate in a sustainable way.

I'm pretty excited about ecosystem-based management as well. I think that is an innovation that will allow us to produce our forest products in an environmentally safe way. It will be in a way that will be endorsed by environmental organizations, and it will allow us to get back into marketplaces around the world, like Germany, England — in fact, all of Europe. Those are key marketplaces for us, particularly with the downturn in the world pulp market.

Right now it is very important that we have access to those markets, so I think the north coast-central coast land use plan has been an exceptional piece of work. I can tell you, if it wasn't for the leadership of the Premier of this province, it would not have happened. The driving force certainly came from the Premier himself. It was a very important initiative to him personally, and I'm pleased that we were able to accomplish that.

There are other components, other land use plans around the province that are important and significant and that we need to continue to focus on. Certainly, Haida Gwaii is a very important land use plan, and Lillooet, Morice and Sea to Sky — four other plans we are working on.

But there are members of this House that would like to see us move forward on other land use plans, and we are working. The member for Powell River-Sunshine Coast has approached me about the development of a land use plan in his area, and we're trying to work on some early stages of developing that plan and allowing it to move forward.

What we do know is that when you have a successful land use plan, when you engage first nations and ensure you have industry, the environmental organizations and local communities onside, you really do create a long-term sustainable environment for people to work in and ensure that industry can be successful.

There are other key components of this ministry as well that we need to continue to focus on. One of them is the.... We manage Crown contaminated sites in the province, and in fact, the budget for Crown contaminated sites this year was lifted by 5 percent, so it has given us the ability to work more quickly on some of the Crown contaminated sites around the province. I think there is none better to point to than Britannia Beach and the work that was done at Britannia Beach.

We've been able to take a mine that was contributing significant contaminants to Howe Sound, and through the work of a couple of different ministers — the now Minister of Health and the now Minister of Children and Family Development — put together a public-private partnership that is going to deliver clean water forevermore to Howe Sound and really rejuvenate the marine environment in Howe Sound back to the way it was, perhaps, even 50 and 60 years ago. Britannia Beach has a tremendous amount of history around it, and I that's a great demonstration of how we can deliver services through a P3 model successfully

and ensure that we're cleaning up the environment and protecting it.

[1615]

We also have responsibility for a number of other Crown contaminated sites around the province. We are working in a logical way through those programs, and we're trying to engage first nations where we can, as well, to ensure that they're involved in the processes around Crown contaminated sites.

I was very pleased to work with the Minister of State for Mining in a new program around mining training that will allow for the cleanup of Crown contaminated sites as well. It's a \$2 million budget. We were able to contribute half a million dollars to that, and I think it really shows a good partnership. I'm certainly very pleased to be able to work with the Minister of State for Mining.

We're also managing a number of different species-at-risk recovery plans. This is a very important area. Why do we have responsibility for that? Clearly, because we have responsibility for land use and land use planning, and oftentimes the way you try and recover a species that is at risk is through further protection of the Crown land base. That is again an area that's very important. We have a species-at-risk recovery office that's doing very good work specifically around spotted owl and mountain caribou right now. We see that work going forward over the next couple of years.

We have a responsibility for Front Counter B.C., which is commonly known as the longest acronym in government. It's ILMBFCBCNROC. If you are keeping track, that's 12 letters. It stands for the integrated land management bureau, Front Counter B.C. natural resource opportunity centres.

This is a new delivery model for Crown lands and services and tenuring. We have a pilot project operating in Kamloops that is working very well for us right now. We're going to expand that out to Prince George, Nanaimo, Surrey and a number of other locations over the next year. We're also investing in the integrated land and resource registry. We're putting an additional \$1.15 million into the project. That is a mapping project that allows people to go on line and utilize the service to identify and download all the different types of overlapping tenures associated with any part of the Crown land base. That's a very effective thing as well.

I want to shift, for the few moments I have left, and talk a bit about skills training. When I think back to almost five years ago, when I was first elected to office, the number-one thing that people came and talked to us about was: "You've got to get the economy going. The economy is lagging. We're lagging Alberta." We'd just slipped below Alberta in terms of total gross domestic product, with a population a third greater than Alberta. We'd actually become a have-not province. We were receiving transfer payments from the federal government. It was not a happy state.

The one thing that we heard consistently from people wherever we went was: "You've got to get the economy going. We need tax reductions. We need regulatory reductions, because if we don't start to see

some economic growth in the province, people will simply leave." In fact, they were leaving at the time with out-migration.

You don't hear that anymore, Madam Speaker. What you hear now, interestingly, is that there are not enough people to fill the jobs that we have. That's one of the biggest challenges. We've heard that from the opposition, we've heard that from the government benches, and certainly we hear it out in the public. The focus needs to be on skills training, because in order to fill the highly demanding jobs that require the new skill sets, we have to have effective programs out there. So we've committed significant dollars — \$400 million — over the next four years to new skills training programs. I touched on one of them earlier with the mineral exploration and mining training program.

I was able to sit in on the Small Business Round Table with the Minister of Revenue, and one of the things that came up in that particular meeting was the need to develop a tax credit program to incent employers to hire new apprentices and move them through the apprenticeship program. So I'm very, very pleased with the \$90 million tax credit that has been created, which will allow that to happen.

We need to train people. We need businesses that are willing to attract and bring new apprentices into the provincial apprenticeship program and to make sure that they're trained and come out the other end and that they're successful in their trades. You won't have that occur if there are not the appropriate taxation and regulatory regimes to make that happen. So rather than us just going out and developing a program and throwing it at business and saying, "Here. We want you to do this, and we think it will work for you," we actually set the \$90 million aside and said: "We're going to go out and consult with industry and find out what it is that we need to do to make sure we create a program that works for people, that works for industry, that makes sure we accomplish the goals."

[1620]

I think over the next number of months, as we go through that consultative process, I'm very excited to see what the outcomes are going to be. I think that we are going to have something that's really going to work, and it's going to help people develop the skill sets they need to ensure they have productive careers in different trades around the province.

In addition to that, we've increased the budget to the Industry Training Authority by \$39 million over the next three years. That will give a significant lift to the development, again, of more apprentices. Clearly there has been significant growth already. We've gone from 14,000 people in apprenticeship programs when we first came to office to 25,000. This additional lift will get us to 35,000, so I'm not sure why people would suggest that we've cut trades training. In fact, we've gone from 14,000 to 35,000 people in trades training programs through the completion of this \$39 million fund.

There is much more that we're doing as well, whether it's the expansion of the BladeRunners program around the province — a \$3 million investment

there — or the \$2 million that I talked about earlier for mineral exploration and mining. One of the kind of exciting things, I think, that we did — even though it went unnoticed, to a degree — was the \$9 million that we set aside to provide up to 2,500 income assistance recipients with a monthly allowance if they volunteer and participate in different sorts of volunteering programs. This is a program that I know the Minister of Forests and Range is very excited about, and he was really pleased to see the lift in that budget. It allows people to find meaningful activities that they can volunteer in, even if they are unable to work. Typically these individuals are challenged, so they need that extra support, but I think that's another great program.

To wrap up, I want to move back to my constituency for a few minutes. Prince George North certainly has seen the best of times and the worst of times, and I've lived through both of those. Unfortunately, the worst of times was largely through the 1990s. In 1998 we had an annualized unemployment rate of 16.6 per cent. Those are the facts. The opposition may not like the facts. They may not like to admit that they were a complete failure through that period of time, but the statistics simply do not lie.

We went from a population approaching 80,000 people in Prince George all the way down to about 72,000 people. We had people literally leaving Prince George because they were so unhappy with the environment and what was going on. We went from housing costs that were reasonable and values that were reasonable to a point where the bottom literally dropped out of the market and people were losing their homes. They were losing their homes on a daily basis in Prince George through that period of time. There was no new home construction in Prince George through that period of time, because people left. When you lose 7,000 or 8,000 people, clearly you are not going to have the requirement for new home construction. Homes that were at a value of \$80,000 or \$85,000 dropped down into the \$50,000-to-\$55,000 range.

That's not how you build a community. You don't build a community by sending people to Alberta to have to find a job. You build a community by looking at strategic investments, by making sure that industry is working and that they're profitable. We had 25 sawmills close in British Columbia through the latter part of the 1990s. What's happened in Prince George? Those were the worst of times. What's happened since we've actually started to see some economic growth? The mill that closed under the previous government, Netherlands Overseas, a Canfor operation, has now reopened and is employing 250 people. Operations like Dunkley Lumber that were just kind of in a holding mode through the 1990s have started to expand. They've invested over \$70 million.

The mining industry has come back. I see I'm down to my last minute or two, Madam Speaker, so I'm going to have to keep my comments tight here. The mining industry has come back. Finning Tractor has almost tripled the employment. Terratech has increased their employment significantly. Mining is back. Forestry is

back. People are building. The community is booming. Housing growth is back on track again — the best housing starts we've seen in years. People are moving back to Prince George, and we're starting to approach that 80,000 population number again.

I know the opposition would like to know this is cyclical, but as I started my speech, Lord help us if we ever go to the other cycle, which is when we have the NDP in government, because we know exactly what will happen. We've seen that twice already.

[1625]

D. Chudnovsky: Madam Speaker, good afternoon to you and to all of the members in the House. I am pleased to rise today to talk about the budget that was tabled last week in this House.

Government calls this the children's budget. The budget got a title this time. It was named.... Children's budget — that's a great name for a budget. I think that's a terrific name for a budget. Wouldn't it be terrific if this government actually created a budget that was proactive in advocating for the children of this province? Wouldn't it be great if the government wrote a budget that really took into account the desperate needs of children and families in British Columbia? I'm going to talk a bit about that. I've got lots to say, in fact, about the budget and the extent to which it speaks to the needs of children, but I'll leave that for a minute.

First, I want to talk for a few minutes about this phenomenon of naming the budget. What qualifies this document that the Minister of Finance read last Tuesday as a children's budget? Well, the minister told us. She said to this House that this was a children's budget because \$421 million had been allocated over four years for children's programs. "So," said the minister, "there's a children's budget."

It's interesting and worth exploring a bit more deeply — the naming of the budget as the children's budget — because last September in her budget, the Minister of Finance announced \$569 million in corporate tax cuts over four years. That would be \$148 million more in tax cuts last September than there was for children this year.

My question to the government — to the Premier, to the minister, to anyone on the other side — is: why wasn't last fall's budget called "the tax breaks for rich people budget"? Why wasn't last September's budget called "corporate tax cuts that weren't mentioned in the election campaign budget"? The answer is: because this government's more intent on political spin than on telling the truth.

Let's unpack this so-called children's budget and see what's there and what's not there.

Point of Order

L. Mayencourt: A point of order, Madam Speaker. The member across the way inferred that our government was not speaking the truth, and that is unparliamentary, so I would ask that the member please withdraw his comments.

Deputy Speaker: Will you please withdraw your comments?

D. Chudnovsky: Yes, Madam Speaker, of course. It's the rule, as I understand it, that members aren't to infer or imply that the government isn't telling the truth in this House, and I certainly wouldn't want to do that.

L. Mayencourt: Madam Speaker, if I may. That is not an unequivocal retraction. That sounds more like.... Well, it just doesn't do it for me. I ask that the member unequivocally retract his comments that inferred that the government was not speaking the truth in its budget.

Deputy Speaker: Member, it was unequivocal — correct, member?

D. Chudnovsky: Absolutely, Madam Speaker. Do I get the time back from...?

Debate Continued

D. Chudnovsky: Let's unpack this so-called children's budget and see what's there and what's not there. Maybe we should start with child care. I want to remind the members opposite that child care is about children. You'd think, then, there would be something about child care in the budget — especially a so-called children's budget — but you'd be wrong. Instead of initiatives on child care, we get more of the same: diverting federal child care funds into a broad range of children's services that, while they may be admirable programs, are not child care.

[1630]

The strains this imposes on B.C.'s child care system are now showing up in the numbers. In September the government projected 85,000 licensed child care spaces. This budget reduces that forecast by between 6,000 and 13,000 spaces. The government now projects only 72,000 to 79,000 licensed spaces. Similarly, the number of families receiving child care subsidies is now forecast to be 22,000, down from a forecast 27,500 in September. In B.C., under the leadership of this government and this budget, we're going backwards — and dramatically backwards — when it comes to licensed child care spaces. But diverting federal child care funding away from child care is an old story for this government.

The problem is the story gets worse, because, as we know, the previous federal government had implemented a national child care program to be administered by the provinces. Now the new government in Ottawa has cancelled that program. That's \$500 million earmarked for child care in British Columbia — cancelled.

It's instructive to have a look at the response of the government and this Premier to the cancellation of the first new national social program in decades. The Premier's response? No response — not a peep, not a

whimper. No leadership at all. Compare that to the Premier of Quebec, who is demanding the money for the children of Quebec. Compare it to the Premier of Ontario, who is advocating on behalf of children in his province. The Minister of Finance tells us it's a children's budget, even if she meekly accepts that half a billion dollars of federal money earmarked for children in B.C. is gone.

Let's turn to education, kindergarten-to-grade-12 education, because the people in our schools are children. We're told by the Minister of Finance that it's a children's budget. So what's in the budget for our public schools? The Premier and the minister are all over the media crowing about the increase in funding, but as usual with this government, it pays to look at the numbers a little bit more closely. The increase in per-pupil funding that the government is projecting is 2.35 percent over the next three years. Inflation is expected to be 6.5 percent over the same period. Therefore, per-pupil funding in our public schools — that's children — is to lag more than 4 percent behind inflation for the next three years. There's a children's budget for you. There is a commitment to children.

At the same time, funding for private schools is going to go up 10.7 percent. It's not a big secret where this government is going, not a big secret what their priorities are, not a big secret what their agenda is for public schools and what their agenda is for private schools. The numbers tell the story.

You do have to wonder what's going on in the corridors of power. Who's running the ship? Is there anyone over there learning lessons from their own experiences?

Only a couple of months ago this government precipitated a completely unnecessary confrontation with teachers, parents and communities across this province. It was a confrontation precisely about the funding and resources available to public schools. It was about class size problems and class composition problems. Now, we know that after years of denying there was a problem, after years of pretending that the government's massive cutbacks in services to children had a positive impact on schools and students, finally, last fall, the Premier and the Minister of Education admitted that yes, we do have a problem in our schools when it comes to class size and class composition.

[1635]

You'd expect to see that realization, late as it was, reflected in the budget. You'd expect to see resources allocated in the budget to deal with the real challenges in our public schools, challenges the Premier and the Minister of Education have finally noticed. But no, there is no allocation for class size improvements and class composition improvements in the budget — not there. They didn't make it into the children's budget — no allocation in the budget for the results of the minister's much ballyhooed round table.

You remember the round table, Madam Speaker. The minister told us that was going to be the solution for class size and composition: get everybody together around a table and abracadabra, the problems would

be solved. But of course it takes resources to solve the problems of class size and composition in our schools: 9,000 classes with more than 30 students in them; 11,000 classes in the province with four or more identified students with special needs. You can't solve those with a discussion, no matter how round the table is and no matter how many folks you invite in for a talk. It takes resources. It takes political will. You'd think it would be there in a children's budget, but sadly, tragically, it's not.

You'd think that in the throne speech we would have seen a commitment to class size limits and class composition guarantees in the School Act. That was what the students of this province were promised at the end of the government's dispute with the teachers. The government created a two-week crisis in the schools, and to get out of it, they promised to guarantee services to students and that the guarantee would be enshrined in public policy. Now, as we know, that wasn't the preference of the teachers. The teachers' position and the teachers' preference was to provide those guarantees in collective bargaining. But the teachers were willing to compromise, and in return for that compromise the government committed to guarantees for class size and class composition in legislation.

You'd think we would have heard about that legislation in the throne speech. You'd think this government, bruised and battered and isolated during the fall because of its disastrous education policies, would have tried to calm the waters by making good on its commitment to B.C.'s children. But no such legislation was announced, at least not yet. So we look forward in this session, in the season of the children's budget, to the government getting around to keeping its commitment to the children of the province when it comes to class size and class composition.

Speaking of children and the children's budget, recently the national statistics on child poverty were announced. You know, Madam Speaker, 24 percent of children in B.C. live under the poverty line — a quarter of our children. In British Columbia in 2006 a quarter of our children live in poverty. I use that phrase purposefully, a quarter of our children, because they are our children. Those kids living in poverty are our kids. They aren't somebody else's responsibility; they're our responsibility in this House. So you'd expect to see something about those kids in the so-called children's budget. You'd expect a plan, a campaign, a commitment, a mobilization, a promise, something, anything. But no, nothing is in this children's budget to deal with children in poverty.

I want to talk for a minute or two, if I might, about health care reform, because the government has signalled to us and told the people of the province that two things are going to happen at once. They're going to privatize, and they're going to consult — going to have a discussion. I think I believe the former more than the latter, but we'll see how it works out.

[1640]

I want to propose from my point of view and our point of view some of the dangers that we face if we

move down the road of privatization. Health care privatization isn't just a concept. It's not just a theory. It's not just an abstraction. It has an impact on people. The studies that have been done and the statistics that have been accrued show very clearly that in many cases when jurisdictions move to private delivery of health care, safety is compromised. Health is compromised.

The first thing that we need to be clear about when we express a concern about the privatization of health care is that it's not an abstraction. It's not, in the first instance, ideological. In the first instance and in the last instance it must be about services to people, their health and their safety. I would recommend to members opposite that they take some time to look at the experience of other jurisdictions when it comes to the privatization of the delivery of health care, because there are serious concerns with respect to the health and safety of people who seek health care and need health care in those situations.

The second proposition I would make with respect to the privatization of health care is that when any service moves from being a service provided by a community to itself, something that we do together with one another on the basis of need.... When that becomes a commodity that's dealt with in the marketplace, the market begins to drive the decisions that are made and not the need. We do ourselves a disservice and we do the health of our community a disservice if we move to a system in which the market drives health care decisions as opposed to the needs for health and health services of the members of our community.

We cannot do everything for everyone in health care or in any of the other services that we provide together for one another, but one thing we can make sure of is that the decisions we make are based on health needs and not market needs. That's what medicare is about. That's what our parents fought for. That's what took care of us as children, and that's the kind of system we need to continue to have.

That brings me to the third proposition on the privatization of health care. For better or worse, the decisions made — and sometimes they're worse, frankly — about health care in this province are made by the elected representatives of the people. They are made by the representatives who are chosen by British Columbians. That's as it should be.

However critical we are from time to time — and we are, and we'll continue to be — about those decisions, the principle that the government makes those health care decisions and is accountable to the people in democratic elections is fundamental to the way that we understand health care in this country and to the way we should understand health care. We move away from that democratic accountability at our peril. Nobody in this province wants important health care policy decisions to be made by some board of directors in Cleveland or Geneva. It's not what we want. It's not the direction we should be going in.

There will be lots to talk about. I wish I had time to talk about transportation, but there will be other times for that. I want to finish, if I may, by telling a little

story. It's a true story. It has to do with something that happened just last week in this House.

[1645]

Members may recall that last week I introduced a young girl, a constituent, named Tali. Tali is a young woman who I met during the election campaign last May. I knocked on her grandma's door, presented myself and wanted to talk about the election campaign. We had a lot of fun. Tali had a whole raft of questions for me. She had been talking about the election with her family. She finally got a live one at the door, and she wanted to ask a lot of questions.

She had all kinds of terrific questions, and we became friends. At the time I had no idea where her family was at politically. I understand that her grandma voted for me, but it was private. You know, it's a secret ballot, and I don't know for sure. Tali and her grandma got in touch with me a few weeks ago, and they arranged to come on a little private field trip. She came and saw the Legislature, and she was introduced in the gallery. Afterward she and her grandma met with me in my office for a few minutes.

I said to her: "What did you think? What did you think of what you saw in the House?" And Tali said to me: "You know, they don't answer your questions, those guys on the other side there. You ask them straight questions, and they don't answer. It's like they're hiding." So I want to finish by saying: stop hiding. Answer the questions. Be accountable to the people of British Columbia. Tali deserves it.

Hon. C. Hansen: It gives me pleasure to rise in the House to speak in support of this budget. This budget is a message to British Columbia that we have a strong economy and that we are seeing the benefits of that strong economy that are really reaching into every single household in British Columbia today.

I want to start just by talking a bit about some of the incredible economic indicators we're seeing in British Columbia today that really underscore how strong our economy has become. Then I also want to talk a bit more specifically about some of the initiatives that are happening in the province around skills and training, because I think that's one part of the budget that is tremendous good news to all British Columbians.

First of all, just to start out in terms of some of those economic indicators, we have seen in the last four years the creation of a net growth of 275,000 jobs in British Columbia. That is absolutely unprecedented job growth in this province, and it didn't happen by chance. It happened because this government brought a message to the world that this province is once again open to business and encouraging the private sector to come in and make investments and create employment in this province.

In fact, I can remember that momentous occasion when we got word we had surpassed two million people being employed for the first time ever in this province's history. We're way beyond that now, actually. We have surpassed 2.1 million, and it continues to grow at a pretty incredible rate. That growth in terms

of 275,000 jobs in four years is projected to continue in the years to come as more and more companies have confidence in British Columbia, confidence that they can invest in British Columbia and create jobs and support families into the future in all corners of this province.

The other thing we have seen is an absolutely incredible reduction in our unemployment rate. Unemployment rates, as members know, can fluctuate based on two factors. You can have an unemployment rate decline simply because people are getting discouraged and leaving the workforce, not going out and looking for work, but that's not what's happening in British Columbia.

We have seen a steady decline in the unemployment rate in this province over the last five years because not only are people entering the workforce, but they are finding jobs in this province. That's not something that's unique to just one part of the province. It's not just unique to the lower mainland or to the capital city region in Victoria. In fact, every single region of the province has seen a tremendous change in terms of unemployment rates.

[1650]

You may have heard some people talk about the fact that we have the lowest unemployment rates in 30 years. Well, let's just put that in perspective. I'd like to correct that fact. It's technically true — the lowest unemployment rate in 30 years — but it is actually the lowest unemployment rate ever recorded in British Columbia. The reason they talk about 30 years is because it was 30 years ago that we actually started keeping labour force records by Stats Canada in the form that they're kept today. So in terms of that specific economic indicator or that specific set of statistics from Stats Canada, it is in fact the lowest in 30 years. That is the lowest all-time recorded unemployment rate in this province.

For December we came in at 4.9 percent, which is incredible given where we were five years ago. In fact we are now at 5.1 percent, so it's still in that range of being among the lowest ever recorded in the province.

Let's look specifically at some of the regions as well. Look at Vancouver Island and the central coast region as recorded by Stats Canada. What it shows is that we have an unemployment rate there of 5.4 percent. Now, let's go back to the late 1990s when the NDP were in office. The unemployment rate in that region actually reached a high of 11.8 percent. If you think about it, the unemployment rate today is less than half of what it was in the late 1990s.

The Thompson-Okanagan region of British Columbia can now claim to have the lowest unemployment rate of any of the regions in the province, at 4.1 percent. They have an unemployment rate that's lower than the provincial average, and that compares to an unemployment rate of 11.8 percent in April of 2000 when the NDP were in office. That's almost triple. That's almost one-third of the unemployment rate that we'd recorded just six years ago.

In the Kootenay region we see an unemployment rate of 6.4 percent. That compares to a high of 13.6 percent in April of 1998. Again, it's half the rate it was then. In the Cariboo region it's at 5.8 percent, compared to an astounding unemployment rate of 16.3 percent in January of 1999.

In the north coast region of the province the unemployment rate today is at 9.4 percent, compared to a high of 12.3 percent in October of 2000. I can say that when you go up to places like Prince Rupert, there is really the kind of excitement that I think will help drive that unemployment rate even lower. When you see the phenomenal port developments that are taking place in Prince Rupert, there is really a sense that some of the best years for the north coast are the years yet to come, and we will see that unemployment rate decline as well.

In the lower mainland and southwest corner of the province we see an unemployment rate of 4.6 percent. That was actually at a high of 9.3 percent in March of 1998. Every single region of the province is really benefiting from the tremendous economic boom that we've seen over the last four and a half years.

If you look at our growth rates, we have seen that last year British Columbia was leading Canada in economic growth. Depending on which forecaster you refer to, they're either predicting that British Columbia's going to be number one or number two along with Alberta in terms of economic growth far exceeding that projected for Canada as a whole. It is truly British Columbia that is driving the Canadian economy, along with the province of Alberta.

I've been interested in listening to some of the opposition speeches in this House over these last few weeks in response to the budget. Time and time again I hear NDP members talking about how this great economic growth has nothing to do with government policy, that it's simply because of commodity prices. Well, let's think about that for a second. You know British Columbia today is facing the same world commodity prices as the other nine provinces in Canada. Yet British Columbia has gone from having the worst economic growth of any province in Canada in the 1990s to having the best economic growth in Canada today. Yet the other provinces are facing exactly the same commodity prices on the international stage as British Columbia is.

Interjection.

[1655]

Hon. C. Hansen: The member happens to mention things like natural gas prices, which of course in terms of the oil and gas industry is the example I like to point to. In the 1990s we saw oil and gas prices that were the same in Alberta, in terms of world prices, as they were affecting British Columbia. Yet with those same world oil and gas prices what you saw was Alberta booming. The oil industry was flocking to Alberta to take advantage of drilling opportunities that were there.

What did we do in British Columbia? We tied the industry in such knots in terms of regulation and red tape that they were going anywhere else in the world

to explore and drill for oil and gas instead of doing that in British Columbia.

What we've seen in British Columbia as a result of the initiatives that have been taken by this government is that the oil and gas industry is now more excited about what's happening in British Columbia than they are even about what's happening in Alberta. It's those kinds of revenues that are actually fuelling the kind of social spending that we're able to do in British Columbia today. That's where the dollars come from to pay for our education system; that's where the dollars come from to pay for our health care system — along with the other private sector industries in this province which are also doing very well.

The other thing I have heard members talk about is that it's all about interest rates — that low interest rates are what are actually fuelling the British Columbia economy. Again, I point to the fact that the rest of Canada faces exactly the same world interest rates as British Columbia does. Yet in the '90s we saw economic decline and in the 21st century under this government we're seeing economic success, and we're seeing that the business community is now prepared to come to British Columbia once again to invest, create jobs and build the future.

The other thing that I'd like to point out to the members opposite is mining exploration. You can talk about commodity prices that may have had a factor in the reopening of places like Tumbler Ridge, reopening mines like the Gibraltar mine in British Columbia, but if you talk to the companies that are actually doing it, they're saying that in spite of the commodity prices in the world they wouldn't be here in British Columbia today making those kinds of investments if it was not for the policies of this government and the changes we have made over these last few years.

If you look at case after case in British Columbia, if you talk to the job creators in British Columbia, they will tell you that the reason they are here investing in British Columbia and creating those jobs is because of the policies of this government.

I had the pleasure of attending the World Economic Forum that took place just a few weeks ago in Davos, Switzerland. There was one particular session I participated in that I found quite interesting. It was asking the question: "What is it that a jurisdiction has to do in the world to make sure that they can continue to be competitive in the economy of the future?" They came up with five points in this workshop. This is from some of the most learned economists from around the world and CEOs of major companies that are really directly involved in watching and trying to anticipate what the economy of the future may look like.

So these were the recommendations that came out of this particular workshop. There were five points in terms of what governments had to do to make sure that they could continue to grow their economies in the future, so that they could continue to actually create jobs and ensure there was secure and stable employment in their jurisdictions in the future.

The first one they came up with was that those jurisdictions needed to make sure they had a competitive

tax regime — a regime that ensured that businesses could succeed in the creation of jobs and were competitive with neighbouring jurisdictions. When that one went up on the board, I thought to myself: we've already done that in British Columbia with the changes that we've made in this province, making sure that we went from being one of the jurisdictions with the highest personal income tax to a jurisdiction in North America that has one of the lowest — the lowest in Canada for incomes up to \$80,000 and second only to Alberta for incomes above that. That actually allows entrepreneurs to succeed in this province and to want to stay and create jobs.

If you look at the whole system of corporate taxes in this province, we've again gone to a regime that will attract companies to British Columbia instead of driving them out to go and create jobs in other jurisdictions, which is what we were seeing in the 1990s.

[1700]

The second thing that they came out with on this list of five was that jurisdictions had to review their regulatory framework to make sure that the red tape wasn't in fact strangling the job creators in those economies. Again, I recognize that in British Columbia we've done that. We are in fact leading Canada and North America in terms of reviewing our regulatory framework — not to get rid of regulation for the sake of getting rid of it, but rather to put in place regulations that actually accomplish what they set out to accomplish. If we've got regulations on the books that serve no useful purpose other than to strangle job creators in the province, then we should get rid of them. And that's exactly what we've done over the last four and a half years with our reduction of red tape in B.C.

We set out with a goal after 2001 to eliminate one-third of the regulatory requirements in the province — the ones that were redundant, unnecessary and did not serve a useful outcome. We've actually exceeded that. We're now in excess of a 40-percent reduction, and every week we continue to find more that really could be eliminated without compromising the very things that regulations should be in place to do. Out of number one and number two on this list, British Columbia is looking pretty good at being ahead of the curve in terms of where the rest of the world needs to go.

Number three was education, and what they said was that every jurisdiction, to be competitive in the future, needs to have a strong public post-secondary education system. Again, it's an area that British Columbia has a lot to be proud of with the creation of 25,000 net new post-secondary education spaces in the province. There's been specific targeting to make sure that we're actually educating our young British Columbians in the areas that are going to be most in demand in the future, making sure that we can stay current with the number of graduates in technology training, computing sciences and the very industries that are going to drive the economy of the future.

The fourth one they came up with was the need to have a jurisdiction that had a culture of innovation. This is really something that I think this government

has much to be proud of, if you look at the technology that's been driven in the province over the last couple of years. We are now one of the eight largest biotech sectors in North America. Most importantly, we are the fastest-growing, and we are actually the biotech sector that winds up in the commercialization of products much faster than the other seven do. In fact, we are seen as an example around North America for the kind of policies that actually help to fuel and energize the biotech industries in this province. That's just one example. If you look at technology sector after technology sector in British Columbia, we are seen as a province of innovators, and again, we are ahead of what other jurisdictions are looking for.

The fifth one they came up with was interesting, because they said that there has to be an aggressive venture capital market. That was the fifth item on the list of five. Again, in British Columbia we are seen as leaders, and we have other provinces in Canada that are looking to British Columbia to model their venture capital programs after what we're doing in this province here today.

In all of these cases we have lots to be proud of in terms of our track record on building the economy in the last five years but also building the economy of the future and making sure that British Columbia is well-positioned to take advantage of the job-creating opportunities that are there in the future.

I want to shift now to talk a bit about skills and training in British Columbia. This is one aspect of the budget that I think is so vitally important to making sure that we actually meet the economic challenges we have in the province, because while we have had tremendous economic success in British Columbia, that also comes with its set of challenges.

We talk to employers around the province that are facing skill shortages in their respective industries. When you think about it, that's a pretty incredible challenge to have, compared to where we were just five or six years ago. Instead of having people chasing jobs, we have jobs chasing people in British Columbia. We hear examples of construction projects, for example, that are being delayed because of a shortage of certain skilled workers. We have to make sure that we meet that need as we go forward.

[1705]

It has been estimated that over the next 12 years there are going to be a million additional jobs in B.C. We have to make sure that we can actually provide the labour force to fill those jobs. A lot of people have said that all it means is that we've got to create more training opportunities for our own youth in this province. But if you look at the numbers, over the next 12 years we're going to graduate 650,000 British Columbians from our K-to-12 school system, yet we will have a million job openings.

We are a province that has always relied on immigration, and it is through immigration that we're going to have to meet those needs in the future and make sure that we don't slip up at all in terms of providing training opportunities. We also have to provide those

opportunities for new immigrants to come to British Columbia to get the orientation they need so they can enter the workforce and practise their skills to the full level of training they have had.

Training in British Columbia is actually a pretty amazing success story over the last two years when we first established the Industry Training Authority. When the Industry Training Authority was first started as effective April 1, 2004 — so that's less than two years ago — there were 14,676 apprentices in British Columbia. Today there are in excess of 25,400. With the new money that's being put into the ITA budget as a result of Budget 2006, we have set a goal to increase the number of apprentices that are being trained in British Columbia to over 35,000.

We know that those training courses take a few years, and as those young British Columbians get through those programs, we're going to see, increasingly, the number of certifications go up significantly and the number of Red Seal certifications that are being granted in this province go up. That's how we're going to meet the demands of the future for a skilled workforce.

If you look back on the budgets that have gone into industry training in this province over the last decade, you will see that the budget that's now been put in place for the Industry Training Authority is the largest budget ever put into industry training in British Columbia. Let me just share with you a few numbers. If you go back to the year '97-98, when ITAC was first established — actually, the first full year of ITAC's operation, ITAC being the predecessor to the Industry Training Authority.... In 1998-99, the first full functioning year of ITAC, the budget was \$68 million. It then went up the following year to \$70 million, the year after to \$73 million. Well, since we've become government, we have actually increased the amount of money going into industry training in this province to its current level in this coming year of just under \$91 million that is being allocated to the Industry Training Authority. That's going to allow us to make a big impact on training the kind of skilled workers we need for the future.

So in this budget there's actually an increase of \$39 million over the next three years going into the Industry Training Authority specifically. That's going to allow us to increase the number of young British Columbians that can get in. It's also going to allow us to expand programs in areas such as the ACE IT program, which is the program in our secondary schools that is targeted at getting young British Columbians interested in the trades at a younger age.

When I hear stories that the average age nationally in Canada for individuals going into apprenticeship programs is 28 years.... That's way too old. Those are years of a young individual's life that could have been more focused on a higher level of skill if we had got them into industry training earlier.

In British Columbia we're doing exactly that. We are driving that average age down, and it is through programs like ACE IT that allow students in grades

ten, 11 and 12 to actually complete their credits towards their Dogwood diploma, the grade 12 diploma, at the same time as they are completing their credits towards their first year of their apprenticeship program. So you wind up with graduates from a high school in British Columbia who can come out with their diploma, and they also will go right into a second year of apprenticeship in this province.

There have been concerns raised around the rates of completion. Some people have tried to say that that's a result of policies in British Columbia. People who say that, I think, are ignoring the fact that this is a national concern, that British Columbia's not alone when it comes to concerns around completion rates. We've put a focus on that in the last little while to try to encourage completion rates to be increased.

[1710]

The reason that completion rates drop off is because of a booming economy. We found that when the economy goes into a tailspin, as it did in the second half of the 1990s, completion rates would go up because there wasn't enough work for the apprentices to be engaged in on the work side, so they were able to put more time into getting through their apprenticeship program. Now that we see the booming economy in British Columbia, those same apprentices are getting all the hours they can possibly take in their workplace. As a result, we see some slippage in the completion rates.

But as a result of some of the focus that we've put on to try to get the completion rates back up, we are seeing those completion rates rising. If you look at the '04-05 fiscal year, for example, we had a total of 2,378 completions in British Columbia. So far in this fiscal year, as of the end of January, we already had 2,474, which actually exceeded the target we had set for completions in this fiscal, and we still have two months to go in the year.

We will see some pretty significant numbers. Once we start to see these phenomenal increases in the number of registered apprentices, as we see them get through the system, they in turn will be driving significant increases in completion rates in the years ahead.

The other thing the Industry Training Authority is focusing on is the establishment of the industry training organizations. These are organizations where we bring in the employers, the companies that actually are going to be relying on these skilled workers in the future. We're saying to them that government does not have a magic ball when it comes to creating training programs that are going to meet the needs of industry.

I have said to industry representatives when it comes to industry training: government does not want to be the lead actor. At the end of the day, what I would like to see is government be given the award for the best supporting actor. We want industry to lead the industry training programs and to actually identify what those needs are to help structure the classrooms and the programs in a way so that when those apprentices complete their programs, or other industry training initiatives are completed, they can get into the

workforce immediately and start producing to the full level of their training ability.

We set up three pilot programs of the ITOs. There was one set up in horticulture, there's one that's been set up in residential construction, and a third one was set up in automotive repair. Those were our pilots, those three industry training organizations, and they have been a success. There have been lots of things that have been learned from the experience. We've looked at other jurisdictions that have taken a similar approach and learned from their mistakes so that we don't duplicate those mistakes in British Columbia.

We're now in a position to start moving forward on the establishment of other ITOs in other industry sectors. In fact, just last week we had a very successful meeting of the construction sector in the ICI — the industrial, commercial and institutional construction sector — which is another sector that is booming in B.C. That will probably be the next ITO that will be off the ground. Over the coming three years we anticipate that we will be putting in place another ten to 15 ITOs to really make sure that our industry training in British Columbia is meeting the needs of the students, the future workforce and the industry which is going to rely on those workers.

The Industry Training Authority is not the only initiative that is being funded in this budget. There are several other initiatives that I think are equally of importance. There is a phenomenal program in B.C. called BladeRunners. That's going to get an infusion of another \$3 million over the coming years to allow it to be expanded outside of the lower mainland. It has allowed youth who are facing multiple barriers to employment or who are disadvantaged in some way or another.... It's to allow them to get into the workforce, to get the work experience that's so vital to them, to get the résumé and the recommendation. It has been an incredible program and one that we are looking forward to being able to expand.

[1715]

I think most people are familiar with the Trade and Convention Centre project that's being built in Vancouver today. That is a BladeRunners site. The program is running there, and it is providing tremendous opportunity for significant numbers of British Columbia youth who would not otherwise have had those kinds of opportunities.

There is another \$5 million that's going to be going into ESL training to allow new immigrants to integrate into the community and the workforce in a more meaningful and a more fulfilling way. Often what we find is that a lot of the ESL programs in place today will give a certain level of language skill, but not skills that are actually tailored to the needs of a worker in the career they have been trained for. As a result, we see hundreds and thousands of individuals in British Columbia, new immigrants, who really are not able to enter the workforce to the full level of their training. This new money will go a long way to helping that.

There is \$17 million going into extending broadband Internet access across the province and to provide

equipment and training to 117 first nations communities. We see how powerful the Internet is and how powerful computer technology can be, but if you can't access it, then you can't be part of that new economy that is growing. Yet with access to the Internet across the province, we are seeing that individuals can be very much a part of worldwide commerce and really find some exciting careers in even some of the smallest communities because of that access.

There's another \$2 million that's going specifically into mineral exploration and mining training, and there's been a very successful project that has been embarked on in Fort St. John in the oil and gas industry. It's the oil and gas centre for excellence that is specifically aimed at training individuals, British Columbians, for the oil and gas sector. Now we want to see that expand into the mineral exploration sector as well. There's another \$9 million that's going into a community volunteer program, and this, again, is a very important skill.

In dollar after dollar that has gone in as part of this \$400 million of new money for industry training, it is really going to meet the needs of the future to make sure that our young British Columbians and our new immigrants to this province are really part of making sure that the economic success we see in the province today will continue for years and years to come.

Deputy Speaker: Member for Malahat-Juan de Fuca.

[Applause.]

J. Horgan: I thank all of my friends in the House for that robust applause.

Before we get going, I just wanted to quote from the member for Peace River South, who said during his remarks today: "We're all friends with different ideas." I certainly feel a kinship with the member, but as I look at many of my friends from the executive council along the way, I'm not certain that they hold me with the same level of camaraderie that you do. Nonetheless, I'm very pleased to see the Minister of Revenue here to keep me on my toes over the next half an hour while I make my remarks on the children's budget that was tabled last week by the Minister of Finance.

I would like to make a couple of comments about the remarks made by the Minister of Economic Development, if I could. He touched on a few of the items that make for a robust economy. He talked about commodity prices; he talked about interest rates. He didn't mention federal transfer payments, which of course we'll all remember were constricted during the 1990s by the then Minister of Finance, the outgoing Prime Minister, Mr. Martin. In a bid to purchase the office of Prime Minister, he increased transfer payments after 2001. Before that, they were shrinking, and they were shrinking significantly. So that's one that perhaps the Minister of Economic Development could put on his list of reasons why the economy is so robust today.

He didn't talk about our natural advantages here in British Columbia either. He didn't talk about our access to markets. He didn't talk about our fantastic port facilities, and I know the Finance Minister is an expert on our ports — certainly in Vancouver — and over time will become knowledgeable on our ports in Port Alberni and Prince Rupert.

There are significant natural advantages in our economy that are assisted when there is an upturn in commodity prices. We're a resource-based economy, always have been, and we're in the process of transition. That transition began in the 1990s, which some would like to call a decade of doom and gloom. Certainly, just about every single person on that side of the House makes sure to mention it in their remarks. This is probably passed down from the chief of staff to the Premier: "Make sure you say something bad about the NDP when you are on your feet or you're wasting your time in the Legislature."

[1720]

I'd like to think, as my friend from Peace River South sets the example, that we would take a higher road when we're having these discussions. Certainly, we all in this place want to see a robust economy. We want our communities to grow. We want to see our children thrive and prosper in the education system, in the post-secondary education system and beyond that in the workplace. These are things that we all want to see, and I'm confident that the members opposite, if they would leave the 1990s where they are, as a piece of history, and focus their attention on the future....

Interjections.

J. Horgan: You don't want them to come back. There are my friends who just have different ideas over there. Thank you very much. I thought for a moment you were going to be silent for the whole four minutes of my preamble here.

Interjection.

J. Horgan: Okay. Thanks a lot for that. I recall that the member from Comox wasn't here during the '90s.

Hon. S. Hagen: In '91 I was.

J. Horgan: Yeah, '91, on the way out the door. That's another thing I wanted to touch on, but perhaps later in my remarks.

A couple of other issues that the Minister of Economic Development failed to mention. The Olympic bid. We've all been embracing the Olympic bid over the past number of weeks and months and years, and it was an NDP government that started that bid. Certainly, I know the Premier does give credit where credit is due when pressed. If only the members on the other side would recognize that public policy is a river. It didn't start in 2001. It didn't start in 1991. It's an evolutionary process. All governments of all stripes over the course of history in British Columbia have added to

the totality of our regulations, which the Minister of Revenue likes to dispatch....

Deputy Speaker: Member. Member, through the Chair.

J. Horgan: Through the Chair.

Interjection.

J. Horgan: Yeah, there you go.

My friends are uppity, Madam Chair, and I'm very appreciative of that.

Deputy Speaker: Member, through the Chair.

J. Horgan: I think I said: "Madam Chair, my friends are uppity." If I'm off the mark, please let me know.

We started the Olympic bid. We kick-started the oil and gas boom in the Peace, and I know that the member for Peace River South will acknowledge that. In fact, it was this government that retained, I believe, the former member for North Coast.... I think I can use his name. He was a Premier; he was a minister. It was Dan Miller. He's heading up the competition bureau for the government across the way.

During the 1990s he was the minister of everything. He was responsible for all the doom and gloom, yet good enough to get a job with those guys. I don't see a disconnect there. Maybe the member for Peace River South, through you....

Interjection.

J. Horgan: There were slow years of infrastructure development at the end of the 1980s. The member for Comox Valley would be aware of that. The NDP government of the 1990s had targeted tax breaks for film, biotech and high-tech, and started infrastructure development during that time.

My last word on the '90s for today is that it wasn't all that bad. It wasn't all that bad. You build on your successes. That's what the Minister of Finance has done.

I want to take a moment to talk about two items within the budget speech that I applauded on the day, and I got odd looks from my colleagues. I want to read out portions of the minister's speech. "Effective April 1, 2006, the foster parents' transportation allowance will be increased by 50 percent." That's an excellent policy. Long overdue, and I applaud the minister for doing that.

I have, obviously, a number of foster parents in my constituency — some of them very close friends of mine. I'd like to name them at this point. Darlene and Calvin Younger. Kim Dupont, who started Dads in the Hall — an organization in my community that's committed to trying to take kids off a bad track and put them on the right track — a foster parent for 22 years. Sandy and Rob Case, foster parents with.... It seems every time I see them they've got seven or eight different kids in baskets or bunnies, and they're walking them around. A 50-percent increase in their transporta-

tion allowance is a good piece of public policy. I applaud the minister for that.

The other point I want to make today — of the two that I want to make that are favourable of the budget — was this portion of the speech. It's only half a thumbs-up. I would have liked to have given it a full thumbs-up, and I did thump on my desk as the minister was speaking, but sadly, I didn't wait for her to finish her remarks because I left it with a frown after that.

[1725]

It goes as follows, and the Minister of Economic Development touched on this: "This includes expanding the BladeRunners program, which currently operates in Vancouver, Victoria and Nanaimo. It offers youth at risk a chance to enter construction trades with on-the-job preapprenticeship training." At that point I started pounding on my desk, but this is where I became sad. I know the Minister of Finance wasn't here at the time, so it must have been a historic record that was brought to her attention by some of the sharp wits in the Premier's issue management office. She finished that paragraph by saying: "The program was scaled back during the '90s when we had a less active construction sector." Well, we started the program in the 1990s. We started the program. It's a good program. I applaud the minister for infusing money into it. It's unfortunate that the rhetoric had to ruin the statement during budget day.

A couple of other things I want to touch on are the roles and responsibilities of all of us in this Legislature. I've had some time to reflect over Christmas since we were last here. As I've been interacting with my constituents — whether they be in high schools or post-secondary education or whether it be in the barbershop where I go to cut what hair I do have on occasion, or just on the main streets of Langford and other portions of my community — I've said to people that my job as a member of the opposition is to hold the government to account.

The job of those on the other side is to take a budget, put it before this Legislature, pass it if they have the numbers to do so and administer the government of British Columbia and all of its agencies, boards and commissions. That's what they do. What I'm supposed to do on this side of the House with my colleagues, my learned colleagues, particularly my colleague for Nelson-Creston, is to hold the government to account.

Going back to the comments of the member for Peace River South, I'm happy to call him my friend who happens to have a few different ideas. But where the whole relationship in this friendship starts to falter is when we get off the track of what our roles and responsibilities are here.

As a historian, I understand the historical record is very important. It will be written and rewritten time and time again, for the next 50, 20.... Who knows how long? We'll be rewriting history for as long as we're in this place. But our job on this side of the House is to take on the Attorney General, to take on the Minister of Revenue and certainly to take on the Minister of Fi-

nance. That's what we're supposed to do. I don't hold any animosity toward any of the members on the other side on most days. I'm certain they don't feel any animosity towards me — certainly those that are assembled today. I consider them all to be rosy and happy.

That's our job. I've been going into schools. I've been talking to students, and I've done my level best to not be partisan, because I don't believe that's our job. As we leave this place, we're trying to educate the public, and we're trying to educate the people in our community about the good work that we're all trying to do here, about the good work of the government of British Columbia and the outstanding work of the new robust opposition. This is good.

D. Chudnovsky: That's an example of robustitude.

J. Horgan: Robustitude? Robustitude. It's not as good as repurposing or subsidiarity, but robustitude will work for me. My friend from Kensington has always got a word or two I can use.

The challenge for us on this side of the House — and I heard it a bit today in question period — is a sense of exasperation on the government side: "There they go again." Well, that's our job, people. Get over it, okay? That's what we're going to do every day for the next three years. I suppose I should also take a little bit of my own medicine, and when it starts coming back at me from the other side, particularly from my good friend who I look at every day, the Minister of Revenue, I have to deal with that. But I have to tell you that my constituents....

An Hon. Member: How do you think we deal with it?

J. Horgan: Yeah, not so much.

We've heard a lot of numbers today, and I'm not meaning to make the Minister of Finance blush by bringing this issue up. We've heard a lot of numbers. We've heard numbers for this, numbers for that. Growth is up; growth is down. Revenue is up. We're going to put this much here, this much there. But when I ask my friends at my local barbershop, Sullivan's Barber Shop at the Westbrook Mall in Langford — for all of your haircutting needs....

Interjections.

J. Horgan: Supporting the private sector whenever I can.

I ask them: "What's the number that stands out from the budget?" The number is 600 bucks. That's the number that's resonating in people's minds. That's unfortunate, but that's the nature of the game.

When we were tabling budgets in this place, we had infusions of cash for this and infusions of cash for that. It doesn't resonate with our public. It doesn't resonate with people. What I've been doing since November after we finally got our offices set up.... We're trying to get into a groove here as members of the op-

position, trying to hold the government to account. I started going around talking to people. What are the issues that are really important to them? Were they touched upon in the minister's budget speech last week?

Some of them were. As I said, a transportation allowance for foster parents — fantastic idea. Shame it wasn't more. Could there have been an increase in social assistance for single-parent families? Yes, there could have been. I know that the member for Kamloops would have liked to have done that, but apparently there wasn't any room. Fair enough. We're going to call you to task on that, and you're going to have to listen to us day after day after day. Get used to it. That's what we're going to do.

[1730]

That's it for roles and responsibilities, roles and functions. I think the executive council has got it figured out by now that there are not just two people over here anymore. There are 33, and we come with diverse backgrounds. We come from diverse communities. We are — some rural, some urban, some from business, some from the public sector and some are educators — a wide and diverse group of people on this side, as there is on the other side. Is that serving democracy in British Columbia? I think it is. Do the people in our constituencies feel better about what's going on in Victoria than they did from 2001 to 2005? I think they do.

I know it's my friend from Peace River South's joy to ask himself a question and then answer it, and I think I'll do that for a bit now if I can indulge my friend from Kensington. I think that our public is better served by having a robust opposition and a government that currently is a bit on the ropes, but that's okay.

I know that the member from Comox has kind of bobbed and weaved a little bit. It's been difficult for him, but to his credit he is still hanging in there, taking punches.

Interjection.

J. Horgan: Good on you. Hear, hear.

It's a tough job, a very tough job. He is doing the best he can.

It's unfortunate that decisions were made during the 2001-2005 period that had to be amended by the Minister of Finance's child-friendly budget, but nonetheless, that's what happened. I want to talk a little bit about health care but not to any great extent. We have three critics on our side to deal with that, and certainly, the Health Minister is going to have his hands full dealing with them. I want to touch on a few things.

Recall the Romanow commission. Those of us, certainly, on this side will remember that. Roy Romanow is a learned fellow from Saskatchewan, NDP Premier, Attorney General during the repatriation of the constitution — which might be of interest to the Attorney General. Perhaps not.

Mr. Romanow took a whole bunch of people and travelled around the country and talked to British Columbians about what they wanted to see in their public

health care system. As I think back, it was.... How long ago was that? That's right; it was two years ago — three years, if we're in 2006. In 2003 the Romanow commission reported. What happened? Where did it go?

Is it in Lillehammer? I understand that's where the Premier is going. He could look at the recommendations from the Romanow commission — made-in-B.C., made-in-Canada solutions to the challenges we face with an aging population. He could have looked right here. Didn't happen. Doesn't happen here. It's not happening in other jurisdictions. It's certainly not happening with the new Conservative government. That's a shame.

Innovation within the public system is here. It's available; it's ready. You'd certainly have buy-in from this side if the government on that side said: "Let's down tools in this war of partisanship, and let's try and solve the problem." Let's look for solutions right here in British Columbia. Let's talk to health care workers — who we, I would have to say, treated poorly, to be generous, during the 2001-2005 period. Let's talk to them. Let's see what solutions they can offer up to us now to move ahead with revamping public health care for the 21st century.

It's not that tough. I know that my friend from Burrard and my friend for Peace River South and I could sit down and have this thing worked out in no time. Sadly, we'd have to go back and talk to the spin doctors and the handlers, and they'd say: "Oh no, no, no. We can't do that." They'd have to say: "Well no, it wasn't robust in the 1990s. Everyone was sick in the 1990s. No one was healthy in the 1990s."

Interjection.

J. Horgan: My friend from Comox, thankfully, has put me onto another track, because that's important when you are standing up extemporaneously making remarks about a budget that happened some time ago.

I'd like to talk a bit, if I could — through you, Madam Chair, and of course to my friend the Minister of Revenue — about strategic public investments and infrastructure and how they fuel the economy. My friend from Peace River South, who is a soulmate, made reference to that very thing, talking about oil and gas, and road development in his constituency — very important, vital to economic development. It's equally vital in the lower mainland and on Vancouver Island.

I know that my friend the Minister of Community Services will be interested to hear these comments about the importance of infrastructure development in our community here on Vancouver Island. Vancouver Island was and should be the second-most robust portion of the economy in the lower half of British Columbia, but sadly, according to those on the other side, it's not good public policy to invest in New Democrat constituencies.

[1735]

I want to say that \$3 billion for the gateway initiative in the lower mainland.... I don't begrudge a penny

of that if it can facilitate economic development and move people around in the lower mainland — \$1.2 billion for a RAV line that will take tourists to a train stop that could take them up the Sea to Sky Highway to Whistler for another \$800 million. What do we get on south Vancouver Island? We got \$8 million for the Dougan Lake stretch, which I'm very thankful for. We got \$220,000 for a study of the Malahat Drive. So \$8.2 million for the lower Island and \$4.8 billion for the lower mainland.

We've been neglected....

Interjection.

J. Horgan: The Minister of Community Services agrees with me that we have been neglected. We've been neglected. It's just delightful to see so much energy. Maybe if the Minister of Finance had more energy in her budget we wouldn't have had to use so much of it today.

We were anticipating energy. We were anticipating an invigorated document, and the only number that sticks in people's minds is 600 bucks. That's a tragedy for the minister, and it's a tragedy for this place, because the work we are all doing here is, by and large, important. It doesn't feel that way to many people in our constituencies, but it feels important to us, so we'll carry on doing it, I suppose.

So \$8.2 million for road infrastructure in the lower Island and \$4.8 billion in the lower mainland....

Hon. I. Chong: It helps Victoria.

J. Horgan: It helps Victoria, says the member for Oak Bay-Gordon Head. It helps Victoria to spend \$4.8 billion in the lower mainland, \$8.2 million on the south Island.

I know the member from Comox takes the road. He drives the Malahat, I'm sure, periodically. He would probably, if given the opportunity, speak up in executive council and say: "You know, we need a little bit more money in the lower Island. We need a little bit more money to keep this economy going." As the member for Peace River South said, infrastructure drives the economy. I know the Minister of Revenue agrees with that statement. Why don't we see infrastructure development here? Why don't we see transit development?

We had an announcement today. I was there with local dignitaries. The mayor of Victoria was there, and the mayor of Lake Cowichan — no friends of mine politically, although I guess we are friends with different ideas, as my friend from Peace River South said. We were talking about the Island Corridor Foundation. This is a group of first nations, of municipal leaders who have got together and created a charitable foundation and taken over the E&N corridor. I know the member from Comox is as excited about that as I am, because it puts local ownership of this important transportation link in public hands.

CP Rail, as a term of Confederation, built a rail line on Vancouver Island. That was a good thing. At the

time, John A. Macdonald got to come out here. He was the member, I think, for Victoria at that time. I know Port Moody-Westwood is a historian; he might correct me on that. John A. Macdonald was here to bang in the last spike. He may well not have been the member for Victoria at that time, but he certainly had been at some point in that period. So the E&N corridor is important.

Interjection.

J. Horgan: You'll learn a lot from me if you just turn me on and let me go.

Hon. R. Thorpe: I thought you were the Transportation critic.

J. Horgan: Not in 1886.

The Island Corridor Foundation.... Jack Peake, the mayor of Lake Cowichan — again, he sought a Conservative nomination. He's not a political friend of mine, but he's passionately committed to locally owned transportation solutions on Vancouver Island. Today they announced that CP Rail had transferred the corridor to this foundation. It is fantastic news.

A little bit of hallelujahs from my friends?

[Applause.]

Thank you very much. Thank you very much.

Interjection.

J. Horgan: Just going to take a drink. Why don't you heckle me while I have a drink? No?

Interjection.

J. Horgan: An open mind, constructive criticism from the government.... Well, I'm glad I have your attention, anyway. That's the important thing as we get close to six o'clock.

The E&N corridor is a great opportunity for commuter rail on Vancouver Island. Those members I know, again, the Port Moody-Westwood.... The West Coast Express, although ridiculed when that side was on this side, is full every day. Is it subsidized? Partially. Of course it is; it's public transportation. But it's full every day.

People driving on Highway 1 — are they going to get on the train? I know in my community people would rather be on the train. If you live in Duncan, you can get on a train and be in downtown Victoria in an hour and ten minutes. You get into your car in Duncan at seven o'clock in the morning and it will take you an hour and 45 minutes to get here. You're harried and frazzled when you arrive.

[1740]

Interjection.

J. Horgan: Productivity would go up, hon. Minister of Revenue, if we could put people on a train from Nanaimo down to Victoria.

They can read their newspaper. They can have their laptops out. They can send some e-mails, and they'll arrive refreshed, perhaps have a cup of cappuccino. Now you don't have to fix the Malahat, because you've got people on the train.

Interjection.

J. Horgan: There you go.

Infrastructure development drives economic development. Again, I continue to agree with my friend from Peace River South, who has somewhat different ideas, but that's the case. That's the fact of the matter. We'll get no disagreement on this side of the House. Positive infrastructure development will increase economic development.

I want to talk about a....

Interjection.

J. Horgan: Perhaps my friend from Nelson can tell me about the lights, because I understand they're various colours, and I don't know what they mean. I can keep talking.

Interjections.

J. Horgan: Yeah, wind it down. Okay.

I want to talk about education capital for a moment, because again it speaks to.... If you elected New Democrats on Vancouver Island, bubkes; if you're elected somewhere else, on that side of the House, money's flowing. Milk and honey in those constituencies, but not in mine.

In school district 62, we have an increase in enrolment, one of the few districts across B.C. with an increased enrolment. We desperately need two new high schools — nada, not a thing, not happening.

I appeal to the Minister of....

C. Evans: Five and a half minutes.

J. Horgan: Five and a half minutes? Thank you very much.

I appeal to the Minister of Education to discuss this with her officials. Of course, I had to go through the Premier's office and meet with the ministerial assistant and vet my questions before I met with public officials. Again, the roles-and-responsibility thing gets a little bit blurred here.

I know my friend from Burrard would endorse my being able to go talk to people to help my constituents. I'm not going into this with malice. I don't want to disrupt the Minister of Education. I want to improve the quality of life in my constituency. It's not to score political points. That's easy enough to do, standing in this place. But when we're interacting with public servants that are being paid by the moneys that were approved, or will be approved, by this coming budget, I believe I should have a right and a responsibility to talk to public servants about improving the lot of my constituents.

Not going to happen; got to go through Martyn Brown. Check it out.

Martyn, I'm here. I want to talk to people about my constituency. Why won't you let me do that?

An Hon. Member: Why is that?

J. Horgan: I don't know why that is. But it bugs me — a lot.

An Hon. Member: Can you get that changed?

J. Horgan: I can't get that changed, but maybe the Minister of Finance might put in a good word for us about speaking to public servants, about improving the public lot in our communities.

The last thing I want to talk about.... We're running out of time. I understand I only have about five and a half minutes left. I want to talk about....

Interjections.

J. Horgan: Oh, that was three minutes ago. Yeah. I'm getting the hook from Port Moody-Westwood.

There's an issue brewing in my constituency and constituencies right across this province. It has to do with meat inspection regulations. I want to raise this now, because the Minister of Agriculture, in his response today, spoke glowingly about the agricultural sector, and I support that. The Cowichan Valley has been the breadbasket of British Columbia. It has been in the past, and I'm hopeful it will be in the future — a vibrant agricultural economy. There's enormous opportunity there. Small farmers are being penalized because large, industrial abattoirs are making people sick. Large, industrial abattoirs are putting *E. coli* and various other things through the system.

[Mr. Speaker in the chair.]

We have meat recalls in various large, industrial distributors of meat. But in small locations on Vancouver Island, on the Sunshine Coast, in the Kootenays, there has never been a problem — never been a problem. Well, the Minister of Revenue talks about regulations that stifle and restrict growth and development.

Nothing could be dumber than this one, hon. Speaker. It's very good to see you in the chair. I am happy you could be here for the last couple of moments of my remarks on the budget.

This is an issue of significant importance in my constituency and other constituencies on both sides of this House. We raised it with the minister in estimates last fall as we were finding our feet as new members, and he made a commitment that something would be done. Well, the only thing that's been done — as far as I can tell, based on the volume of e-mails and phone calls I'm getting from disappointed and disenfranchised farmers — is nobody's listening. Nobody is listening. If the Minister of Agriculture would take this

issue seriously, I know it would be a great benefit to people in my community.

[1745]

I've enjoyed this opportunity to talk today. I always do. It's a fun place to be. I enjoy the job. I want to thank my constituents for giving me the opportunity to be in here and say these few words. I also want to go back to my friend from Peace River South, because I came into the House to hear him speak this afternoon because I genuinely believe that his view of what we're doing here is as close to my view as anyone else's on that side of the House.

This isn't a partisan thing. It's not about ideology. It's not about scoring points. It's about doing what we can to improve the lot of the people in our constituency. That's why we all came here, and that — surprisingly, for me — is the most enjoyable part of this job. I get very disappointed and despondent when I have to sit here and listen to rehashes of the 1990s that just aren't consistent with the fact pattern.

Can I say that, Mr. Speaker?

Mr. Speaker: No, you can't.

J. Horgan: I think that's an interesting turn of phrase — "not consistent with the fact pattern." I kind of like that.

Interjection.

Mr. Speaker: Member.

J. Horgan: Not consistent with the fact pattern?

Interjection.

Mr. Speaker: Member.

J. Horgan: Okay, fair enough. Spin. I can say spin.

Anyway, I've enjoyed myself. I see some of the members of the executive council, at least, with grins on their faces, so my time has been well spent. I'll give the floor to whomever on that side wants to stand up and bash the NDP in the 1990s.

D. Jarvis: I'm pleased to get up to address the 2006 budget debate. Now, I do have to correct my friend from Malahat-Juan de Fuca. In actual fact, and I hate doing this and criticizing him, but Brenda at the Highland Barbers in North Vancouver is a much better hairdresser.

In all seriousness, as I said, I'm pleased to enter into this debate about this well-balanced budget. Three-quarters of a million dollars is being put forward to the people of British Columbia on top of a balanced budget. You have to imagine this is a great thing for the province. The 2006 budget is part of the step-forward program following the 2005 budget that was mainly focused on the future of the growth of the economy, a very robust economy that we've had since then.

It's quite apparent that it has been a very robust economy, in the sense that we're having good times in British Columbia. Things are moving in the construction field, the real estate industry, commercial business and everything, so it's a wonderful time to be living in British Columbia. We sit here with a balanced budget after what we had gone through in the previous dark decade.

This budget features improved support for seniors, the senior citizens who currently make up about 14 percent of our population. That number of people is continually growing and getting worse, and as I say, this proportion is expected to rise to approximately 20 percent to 23 percent in the next two decades. This government is ensuring that they will receive the support services required to ensure them a full life in the years to come.

This budget also includes a plan to meet the transportation, health and education needs of this growing province. Today this new budget is an extension of the previous budget in 2005, as I mentioned, as you cannot do everything at once. I have lots more to say, but I've noted that the time is growing, and so I move to adjourn the debate.

D. Jarvis moved adjournment of debate.

Motion approved.

Hon. C. Richmond: I wish everyone a very pleasant evening and move the House do now adjourn.

Hon. C. Richmond moved adjournment of the House.

Motion approved.

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

The House adjourned at 5:50 p.m.

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

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