



Second Session, 38th Parliament

OFFICIAL REPORT OF
DEBATES OF THE
LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
(HANSARD)

Thursday, March 2, 2006
Morning Sitting
Volume 6, Number 17

THE HONOURABLE BILL BARISOFF, SPEAKER

ISSN 0709-1281

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

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SECOND SESSION, 38TH PARLIAMENT

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Honourable Bill Barisoff

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THURSDAY, MARCH 2, 2006

The House met at 10:04 a.m.

Prayers.

Petitions

Hon. R. Thorpe: I have the privilege to table a petition regarding school trustee voting age.

Orders of the Day

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

[1005]

Budget Debate

(continued)

R. Cantelon: It's my privilege today to rise and speak in support of the budget.

Continuing my line of thought from last night, I have to say that I was taking what I had heard yesterday, particularly from the member for Vancouver-Fairview, who was concerned about the economy overheating, the fact that we had excessive revenue over our expenditures, that we were running up surpluses and that somehow surpluses were bad.... I was trying to hold all of these things in my brain as I was in my room last night preparing for the speech. I kind of drifted off to sleep and drifted in a bit, and all of these things kind of confused me.

All of a sudden I had an image of the Finance Minister and her new shoes. They were clicking together, and I thought somebody said to me: "This isn't Kansas." Then suddenly I woke up, and I came to realize that yes indeed, this isn't Kansas. But it isn't the British Columbia we've come to recognize. It isn't the British Columbia we've come to know in recent years. There's a difference. The difference is prosperity.

[S. Hammell in the chair.]

We haven't seen much of it here in British Columbia, but we like it. We're going to do more of it — a lot more of it. B.C. is back. Stand back, Canada, because we're back, and we're going to be in here for a long, long run — for an entire decade. We're going to build an economy that's sustainable, that will carry through for the next ten years.

Periodically we see on TV.... The rest of Canada often doesn't recognize that we're here, or if they do, they don't understand that we are a different region. I don't really mind when Calgary is always spoken of, and we have a representative speaking of the voice from the west. They can have that, because really, we're not the voice of the west. We are a distinct region out here.

Within this great region of British Columbia there's a multitude of opportunities, and there's a wide range

of communities — from the interior to the north to Dawson Creek to Vancouver Island, where I live, to the lower mainland and to the Cariboo. It's a rich and diverse region. But with the coming of the Pacific gateway, there is one thing that is certain in the upcoming decade: British Columbia is going to be the centre of Canada's future.

That hasn't quite caught on. I'm not going to belabour the opposition for some of the things that seem, to my mind, to get turned upside down — that surpluses are bad, that the economy's overheating. Many times we've heard them respond to our initiatives in the throne speech and the budget with some positive comments. I think this is a good thing. We do want to listen to our loyal opposition, and we do want to take ideas from them. Be they good ideas, we certainly would intend to use them and incorporate them and perhaps take full credit for them as well. But that's part of the political game.

They like the ideas, but what I have the general sense of is that we just don't spend enough on them. I understand now, and that kind of puts it into perspective for me. Certainly, if we spent more, that would use up the surpluses. Yes, it would eliminate the excess of revenue overspending. I have to say, though, that that is not the policy or the direction this government takes. We do intend to respond in a meaningful way to support the needs of our constituents, but we intend to run the business of government in the black.

This prosperity I speak of is not something we should take lightly. It's something to enjoy, certainly, but not something we need to take for granted. We need to build a sustainable future, and that's one of the aspects that's addressed in this budget.

We need to put more money towards our youth. Our youth are our future. We need to put more money into education. We can certainly see, as our economy rolls along, that we are facing shortages of trained and skilled labourers. That's why I was very happy to see, particularly from my community, that there are more allocations for funding and resources to training and skills development among our youth.

Ninety million dollars will be available as a tax credit. This program hasn't quite been a tax credit for training. This hasn't been quite fleshed out and developed, but it will be done in cooperation with business to provide them with incentives to develop the programs, in cooperation with the universities, to put apprenticeship and trades training into place. The \$39 million available for the ITA — Industry Training Authority — will be funded through public and private educational institutions and, again, will fulfil the need, or will begin to fulfil the need, for training among our youth. We'll need every one of them trained that we can get.

[1010]

I recently visited, with the Minister of Small Business and Revenue, a Parksville operation called Detailed Design and Drafting, run by Nick Osmond. It's quite a unique facility. They have over 30 employees, and they do structural engineering — basically, the

frame construction for steel buildings. They do this for buildings right across North America — in fact, right across the world. They're done here in this little second-storey building in Parksville. It's really quite an amazing operation. They have over 30 employees, and they're all young and well paid.

Mr. Osmond has a very severe problem, and that is obtaining these skilled people, because it takes training above the usual CAD/CAM training. It takes aptitude, intelligence and imagination to run these programs. What he's been doing so far is offshoring his human resources needs. There are extensive training programs in India, where one company will start with a broad net, casting out for some 600 applicants. From this they'll narrow it down to 30, from 30 down to 20, and they'll train half a dozen. Of the half-dozen they train intensively, they'll hire perhaps two. Currently the Detailed Design and Drafting approach is to then hire those two and bring them over from India, because we can't get the training here.

I think this program we've put forward, where we'll allow tax credits for training, will be of particular interest and benefit here. These are high-paying jobs; these are jobs here. I think it's worthwhile to note and credit the management and operation of this company. It would be a lot easier to run this company offshore, and that's being done more and more today — to move it to India, to hire the people there. Certainly, this high-tech kind of operation could be run anywhere in the world — anywhere there are laptop computers and modem connections. But they've chosen to be in Canada. They've chosen to be in our riding and are providing good education for our young citizens. To support these businesses, these entrepreneurs, with training programs, with ITA funding, is critical if we're going to build our knowledge-based industries.

There is so much in this budget that I find as I go through it. There is more and more to it and more and more fills gaps within our needs. The \$50 million natural resources and applied science endowment, I think, is a very intriguing one that will provide new products. We need to diversify our economy. We need to turn research, through engineering, into applied science, into new techniques, into new programs, into new products. We can have the intellectual property ownership of them here in Canada and develop new products for export and the enrichment of our economy.

One of the programs, too, for youth that's been very, very successful in Nanaimo in my constituency is a program called BladeRunners. My colleague next to me from Kelowna expressed great interest in it. He and I are both of a generation where the connotation of "bladerunners" probably would have had a significantly different meaning some 20 or 30 years ago. It probably wouldn't be something you'd want to encourage youth to be involved with. I'll tell you what it is. Their basic philosophy is this: believing in the power and potential of youth. It's a powerful and simple vision statement.

What they're attempting to do is link and connect young people coming out of school and unemployed

people, ages 15 to 30, with contractors and trades, to get them involved and to develop the skills and learning so they can get a job, get to work and start to develop their career aspirations — basically, taking people off the street. Some of it is pre-employment training and helping them to develop what the employers' expectations are of them, what they'll be expected to do when they're working.

It involves coaching and mentorship, job preparation in other ways — such as first-aid training, which is given to them, as well, so that they have the first level of training — and career planning and development. So as they start to get jobs and become productive citizens in our economy and their aspirations begin to rise, then they'll also be hooked up and shown the opportunities for apprenticeship training and other ways that they can further their education. It's a very, very valuable program. It's been very successful in Nanaimo, and I know that as it's expanded through other communities in the interior and throughout the province, it'll be very, very well used.

[1015]

I think this is the kind of program that's significant to endorse and to support, because it's training with a purpose. It takes into account the individual young person's goals and aspirations. It hooks them into something. It gives them a purpose in life and sets them on the right track. So it's very much a one-on-one, very much a hands-on kind of program, and it has been very successful in our community, particularly in taking youths off the street, giving them a purpose, giving them a direction in life and encouraging them with counselling and coaching. I see this is a very, very good program.

One I don't know much about but I'm intrigued by, because it's not an area that's big on the Island, is the \$2 million for mining exploration to develop and encourage youths to do prospecting, but also remediation. Again, I think that to encourage young people to become involved at an entry level in mining exploration and resource development is a very key program.

This budget was full of surprises, and it offered a lot to people in all different walks and communities, but certainly, the big thrust of the budget is education, and \$421 million is being committed over the next three years to address the needs of our young people — at an early age, absolutely, and right through, as I've just described, for youth in training. It's a very critical part of our future. There's no question. If anyone has attended any of David Baxter's seminars and discussions, we recognize that we're going to need every young person to be happy, working and productive in our community to support the rest of our society. There'll be a tremendous shortage of people, and you can't start too young.

You can't ignore the fact that many are being distracted. Crystal meth has been a scourge here in many parts of the community, and I've been reading in the paper locally that now it's starting to raise its very ugly presence and head here in Victoria. It's a drug that with one dose, one experiment — one try-out, if you want —

can cause permanent brain damage. Certainly, the \$2 million funding here to address these concerns and to raise awareness among young people is absolutely critical.

I would have to salute the SOS society in Parksville. SOS stands for Society of Services. It is quite a unique and very entrepreneurial model. They run a recycling clothing store of about 20,000 square feet and generate a vast amount of revenue, which they then turn back into social programs in the community. This group just won a community service award sponsored by the chamber of commerce for providing outstanding leadership in crystal meth awareness. Certainly, the Parksville community has taken a leadership role, identified the concerns and the dangers of crystal meth and is running regular programs to combat it. It's an absolute necessity that we be very strong, very firm and do whatever we can to nip this in the bud and eradicate this scourge of crystal meth. It's a deadly, awful thing.

One of the other items that took my note in the budget was the \$4 million to double the funding — and it hasn't been done since 1993 — for the school startup supplement. My wife has been involved with the local PAC where my two children are in elementary school, and she was always aware that the first day of school is such an important day for young people when they start off. It raises their expectations and hopes, and it has a lot to do with how they feel, their self-image.

We're very sensitive of the poverty level among our young people. For people to go, "Well, I'm not really prepared. I don't have all the books. Other people have their shiny notebooks, their pencils and their coloured inks, but I don't...." It can be a very disheartening thing for young persons to go to school, not feel that they have a full shot at their opportunities for education and feel that they're somehow being treated as second-class. I know that my wife will take great pleasure in the fact that we're going to give them — some 29,000 school-aged children, through this \$4 million doubling of the startup grant — a better first day in school. I think the first day is extremely important, and that will help.

[1020]

As I mentioned, this budget has a wide range of impacts throughout the learning and educational areas. One other successful program that addresses early learning that's been run in Parksville for some time and that will be supported by this budget is a program called BLT. And in case members think I'm about to bring in sandwiches, that is not the case. BLT in this particular case stands for Building Learning Together. It's an outreach program run by school district 69 in Parksville-Qualicum to all the community. It involves a wide range of the community.

Basically, their mission statement is this: to enhance children's development by supporting strong family relationships and community capacity through effective learning opportunities. They have some 18 different programs. It's really quite amazing. It touches on my first metaphor, as well, as you'll see later, but let me just run through some of the programs.

The communities of Parksville and Qualicum, of course, have the largest per capita of seniors in Canada, certainly — perhaps in North America — so they enlist their seniors, who are quite eager and have turned out in great numbers. In fact, they have over 200 seniors, who are called grand-buddies, and they help with the literacy programs, the teaching programs for these young people. They have over 13 Mother Goose sites. Let me just run through some of the 18 programs they run.

Words on Wheels. This is an outreach bus that's very colourfully done. They took an old school bus, decked it out and drive it around. The seniors help them with this.

Hug-a-Book. I think the names of these kind of tell what they do. I won't need to elaborate. Travelling Tales. BLT Backpacks — and again, that doesn't refer to the sandwiches. Circle of Friends Conference. There'll be a conference this coming March, and they'll bring the community together to look at ways that this program can work for them.

Top Cop. The RCMP are extensively involved in the school program. Roots of Empathy, a well-known program that has been very successful in other areas as well, is run as part of this. Mother Goose Goes to School. They bring Mother Goose into the school. Stuffy Buddies, Treasure Boxes, Teaching From the Heart are all programs. Children Services Directory. Cook up a Story — that's one that might be of interest to many people.

Of course, the latest — and this comes back to my metaphor and probably where I went wrong at the start of the day — is Munchkin Land. They use characters from the famous *Wizard of Oz* story in a miniaturized form that is designed to inspire and intrigue the children. You get a key. I got a key, and you get to go to Munchkin Land. You use the key, and the children then have something that's theirs. They can open up the door and unlock their start to learning and knowledge.

All of these programs are exciting, and all of these programs are very good and what we need to be doing. I'm glad to see that the budget in its manifold opportunities and programs supports these types of initiatives in various communities. I'm sure this is one that will be spread throughout.

I want to commend Deborah Davenport, who was here yesterday meeting with the Deputy Minister of Education. I hope that we'll see the opportunities and the imagination and the creativity of this program expanded to other communities in the province.

We've heard about health care. We've heard about the fact that there are concerns about beds and places for our seniors. Again, certainly in my constituency of Nanaimo-Parksville, this is a real concern. This is a real need. But as other speakers have mentioned, particularly my colleague from Burrard, there's a need to change. It is no longer acceptable to warehouse our seniors.

As we move from the transition to what is now known as complex care, yes, there will be shortages,

and there will be concerns, but I have to tell you that in our area the needs are being met very, very well. In Nanaimo and in Parksville some 435 beds are being created. The request for proposals is out. That seems to be almost 10 percent of the entire total for the province, but it's needed in this area and responding. They're high-quality beds — beds like in Arrowsmith where they're renovating, gutting the old rooms and putting them back into a new, more modern facility — where seniors as couples can go and stay and not be separated as we've heard often in the House today.

[1025]

There's much, much more. There are tax cuts too. We're happy to see that the homeowners, too, will be seeking relief.

I could go on, and I would like to go on. There is more, but I'm sure that other speakers will welcome the opportunity for me to sit down and for them to carry on. So I speak very heartily and strongly in favour of this budget, and I look forward to seeing the benefits and effects in my community.

A. Dix: This is quite a momentous moment for me. There is something called a first speech in the Legislature, the tradition of a first speech. For some reason last fall — perhaps a lack of influence with the Whip; I don't know what it was — I didn't give my first speech. So this is my first opportunity to speak to the House in response to a Speech from the Throne or a budget.

The first thing I want to say is that I think it's fairly extraordinary for me to represent a constituency such as Vancouver-Kingsway. It's a constituency, first of all, with a tremendous tradition of politics — of socialist and social democratic politics, for the most part. So it's a real honour to represent it.

I want to recognize the work done by my predecessor, Rob Nijjar, who's a member of the government party, who worked very hard over four years. I think it's always important to acknowledge the work that people do and the contribution to public service they make in the community.

Of course, as I mentioned, I also talked about the tradition of this constituency and its importance and why it is so difficult in some ways to rise and speak. Grace MacInnis represented this community — one of our greatest Canadians, a leader in the fight for human rights and for women's rights in our society, and an inspiration for me.

Dave Barrett represented my constituency, and Dave has just received the Order of Canada. For me, growing up in politics and learning about politics, Dave was an inspiration and has left a legacy in this province, things such as the agricultural land reserve and little things like the SeaBus — a tradition of extraordinary contribution to public life.

Bob Williams and Alex Macdonald and, more recently than that, Glen Clark — all of these MLAs, I think, contributed enormously not just to Vancouver-Kingsway and the life of Vancouver-Kingsway but to our province.

The previous speaker, the member for Nanaimo-Parksville, talked about BladeRunners. Well, Glen Clark played an enormous role in making BladeRunners a successful program over the years. The legacy of all those people makes me very proud.

I'm also very proud to represent Vancouver-Kingsway, because it is an extraordinary community not just in a provincial sense or any sense but in a world sense. It's a community where people have come from all over the world. When we hear — at a time of division in the world, of strife in the world — of people coming together as a community, speaking 60 different languages, managing to work together and live together as a community, that's an inspiration to me.

The other thing I think it says and the other thing about my community that's so remarkable is people's commitment to their families, to hard work and to getting a fair chance and fair opportunity in life. If you look at our work as a community and people's work and the work with their families, you think of inspirational things like the creation of Collingwood Neighbourhood House, which was a creation of the community.

A dear friend of mine, Terry Tayler, who worked with Glen Clark for many years in fact, essentially founded Collingwood Neighbourhood House — a neighbourhood house today that serves hundreds of thousands of people with programs every year. That was put together because the community got together and worked to put it together.

[1030]

The Collingwood crime prevention office, which is recognized nationally, is another element of the community. The work done at Renfrew and Trout Lake Community Centres by community members from all communities, speaking an enormous number of different languages, and the programs and services they give the community are of such value.

I'm honoured to represent Vancouver-Kingsway. It is something that humbles me. I hope to give voice to not only their concerns but their aspirations in this speech and over the next four years.

I want to turn a little bit to the budget. I think this budget is a terrible missed opportunity, and really another missed opportunity after four years of missed opportunity to reflect what I talk about — that sense of community that drives Vancouver-Kingsway, that sense of hope for a better life that drives the constituents in my riding.

Over the last few months I have been up in the House a few times talking about the Ministry of Children and Family Development. I think it's important to reflect on what's happened in the last four years and what this budget says about what's happened in the last four years in terms of children at risk in British Columbia. One of the characteristics of this government for four years has been an abiding elitism. It is a government that believes that some people's voices are more important than other people's voices, that the powerful voices should always be heard and that those voices that haven't been heard — those who aren't able

to go to Liberal Party fundraisers, those voices that don't have access to media institutions — are less important. I think that is a tragedy for our society.

That tragedy expressed itself in what has happened over the last four years to children at risk and in the Ministry of Children and Family Development. We all recall that in the 1990s — some of us remember the 1990s as well — the man who would be Premier of this province, the member for Vancouver-Point Grey, getting up again and again and talking about the importance of serving children at risk. He said it again and again and again. Who would have thought that that Premier, that Leader of the Opposition, would turn around in January 2002 and cut the Ministry of Children and Family Development by 23 percent? Who would have thought it? It was, in fact, a stunning reversal.

What happens when you cut the Ministry of Children and Family Development by 23 percent? What voices are raised to say: "No, that's the wrong policy"? Well, not many in some cases, because the children directly affected have no voice. In many cases they've lost their parents, or their parents are not able to take care of them. These are the ultimate voiceless people in society, and the first thing this government did was cut funding for them by 23 percent.

What happens when you cut funding by 23 percent? How do you do that as someone guiding programs? Well, in that area you can't do it by cutting community grants. In that area you do it in one of two ways. You cut the level of services for families and children at risk. They did that. You cut the number of children you serve. They did that.

We've talked often about the terrible case that has recently resulted in an inquest in Port Alberni. I think it's important to reflect on the impact of those kinds of government decisions on people on the ground. The government in July of 2002 implemented a program called the kith-and-kin program. There was nothing wrong fundamentally with the kith-and-kin program — nothing wrong with it — but they implemented it in a completely negligent manner that reflected the chaos they caused in the Ministry of Children and Family Development.

I talked of the 23-percent cuts. They implemented a new program to protect the most vulnerable children in society by faxing a single document to agencies. That's what they did. That's what it means. When you decide that children at risk don't matter in your budget decision, that's what it means. You start a new program to cut expenditures, and all you can do.... You don't train people. You don't even send an accurate document.

[1035]

The document they sent reflects the decline in public services under this government, reflects a lack of business competence on the part of this government. That document failed to mention 29 serious criminal offences.

How does that reflect itself? That reflects itself in testimony by social workers where they looked at this

document, and they didn't see a criminal offence, and they let a child go to a caregiver. That's how it happens. That's how it happens when social workers have caseloads that are completely unreasonable, particularly in rural communities of this province, and are asked to do impossible jobs. That's how it happens. It happens because some voices matter to this government and some voices don't matter to this government. We have seen that reflected over time.

They did more than that. They did more than cut services to families, cut income assistance for single parents. They did all of those things. Cut access to day care and to assistance for single mothers — cut them off. Those were the policies. At the same time as ministers across the way were saying, "We are keeping children in homes," they were undermining supports for families. That's what they were doing. It was a shame, and you see the consequences of it in every community in this province, particularly in my community of Vancouver-Kingsway. It was shameful, and it speaks to a society that is becoming more divided and a government that believes in dividing a society more.

They did more than that, and this is cynicism beyond any scandal I can possibly imagine. They cut those services to families, they cut those supports to children at risk, and then they got rid of all the watchdogs. They eliminated the Children's Commission. They eliminated the child advocate — both agencies supported by the Premier when he was Leader of the Opposition. They got rid of them. So while they were putting forward these damaging policies for families and children, the people who could blow the whistle on those policies were themselves silenced.

Further than that, they passed legislation to say foster parents couldn't speak out on behalf of children — even though, again, when they were in opposition they said they'd do the opposite. Then they made it impossible for people in the system to get information through FOI. So this is cover-up as public policy. When we talk about a conspiracy, when we talk about cover-up, this is cover-up as public policy. It was not a mistake. It is cover-up as public policy. We see the consequences in communities across this province today.

The hon. members opposite like to talk about being number one and a whole bunch of things. Well, one of the things that this province is number one in right now, number one in Canada — worse than Newfoundland, worse than New Brunswick, worse than Quebec, Ontario and Saskatchewan — is the worst, the highest, level of child poverty in Canada. We have a budget here today that does nothing about it — no plan, nothing. The highest level of child poverty in Canada.

When you say you believe in an entrepreneurial society where people should have equality of opportunity, where people should be able to succeed on the value of their labour, and then you say to one-quarter of the people of this province that they are condemned to live in poverty — and we don't care, and we're not going to do anything about it — that is a policy of division. That is a policy of shame, and that is a policy that

is going to fundamentally hurt our society. It is completely, completely unacceptable.

That policy of elitism is seen everywhere. It is seen in our education system. Our education system is a great equalizer. I go around to the community schools in my riding, and I am amazed at the work that is done in those schools — at Gladstone School where students work together, and as I said earlier, 40 different languages are spoken at home. They work together, and they struggle in larger classes. At Windermere School 400 students volunteer in elementary schools in that area where they struggle, and they work, and they fight. They believe in working hard. They believe in contributing to the community. We owe it to them as a society to give them the best possible education. What have they received from this government in that community?

[1040]

I have a school in my constituency, Norquay School, which has 700 students. There is a large proportion of students who are English-as-a-second-language students. As a direct result of decisions made by this government, a government that claims to believe in equality of opportunity, there are 0.4 teacher-librarians. Just to make people understand what 0.4 means, it means they're there Monday and Thursday — 700 children. The commitment to literacy — Monday and Thursday. That is an embarrassment. That is an insult to the government's own great goals for the education system.

Is it any wonder that we are seeing a more divided society? When we are seeing at a time — and this is a very unusual time, a challenge to all of us, a time where we have at the same time....

If you look back at this last century — the century just past, the 20th century — you see that periods of economic growth generally resulted in a broad improvement in living standards across society. We have a period of economic growth right now where a significant portion of society is seeing their living standards dropping significantly. We're seeing it in every facet of that society. That's partly because of circumstances around the world, but I'll tell you that it's partly because of direct action by this government.

In my community of Vancouver-Kingsway there are 1,500 members of the Hospital Employees Union — 1,500 health care workers. There used to be more members of that union. Every single one of them saw their salaries cut. When the statistics say the highest child poverty in Canada, I can tell you from canvassing in my constituency that if you go around door-to-door, you find house after house after house with children home alone because their parents have to do two, three or four jobs to make it. That's where the rubber meets the road.

With respect to child poverty in this province, we've got the highest in Canada, and they have done nothing about it. At a time of surplus and of plenty, they are dividing our society more, and it is shameful. It is shameful because they have taken away the means of reducing it.

In the past, access to post-secondary education and access to high-quality public K-to-12 education has been the great equalizer. That great equalizer has been

eliminated for many of the students and young people in my constituency by a policy — can you believe it? — that sees higher classes in the public K-to-12 system, an elimination of limits on a number of special needs children in classrooms, an elimination of ratios for teacher-librarians and at the same time a doubling of tuition fees to deny access to a whole group of people who want to participate in the post-secondary education system, who want to live the Canadian dream but have been denied access by public policy of this government. It is a more divided society, and these policies of this government have served to accentuate those divisions.

I want to talk a little bit about health care, because the government in its budget.... Someone said to me the other day: "What do you think of the budget? Do you think it was the worst in seven years?" I said: "No, just the worst in six months."

It's a different thing every time. Last time it was seniors. They did a little thing for seniors, and now they're clawing it back. This time it's a little thing for children. They have no agenda. They announced a new relationship. Their definition of serious public policy is to announce a new relationship with a one-time grant of \$100 million. That's a new relationship. This is a government without vision and without commitment to addressing society's problems.

[1045]

Let's talk about public health care, because it was a big part of the throne speech. It wasn't much a part of the budget, but it's an indication, perhaps, that the trip to Europe that the Premier is now on wasn't given a lot of serious consideration. It probably tells us all, given that the throne speech was all about health care and the budget was not about health care, that maybe no one else got the memo — that in fact after they put a close on the budget, what they did was decide that we have no agenda, so let's do health care. When they say, "Do health care," they mean: do health care.

The fact of the matter is that our health care system — our single-payer health care system, our public health care system — is one of the main reasons why our economy in Canada is more efficient. You don't have to ask me. Talk to the president of General Motors in the United States. Talk to the guy in the United States who for 17 years ran a small lumber business and had to close it down because he couldn't pay for health care. He got a job with a business that provided some health benefits. He closed down his business to do that.

If you look at the *Competitive Alternatives* study that's done by KPMG Peat Marwick, an international accounting firm, they'll tell you this. One of the reasons why our jurisdiction is more competitive and has been more competitive historically than.... Vancouver and Kelowna and Nelson and communities across B.C. are more competitive because of the efficiency of the public health care system.

The statistics are startling. In the United States each citizen pays \$1,200 for health care administration — not

for health care, for health care administration — to insurance companies. In Canada, our efficient public system, it's \$300. For businesses, for individuals, that is a huge advantage to our economy.

They want to privatize our system. This trip to France, if you excuse the expression, is a canard. What they have in mind, when they're talking about the public health care system, is the United States.

Let's remember. Let's reflect on the value of public health care to our country, our people, our economy, our society. First of all, it says what we all know: health is a public good. It's not a private good; it's a public good. What public health care means for all of us is that what is good for some of us should be good for all of us — that our health care, our access to health care, our access to good health should not be determined by our income. It says to the wealthy — those of privilege in our society, those of power in our society — that if you want to improve health care, if you want better access to health care, then you have an obligation to improve it for everybody, not go out and buy it yourself.

They say we can't afford it. They say we can't afford good health care. They say it's not sustainable. In the last 60 years we have seen remarkable innovations in health care, all of which have made health care in many respects more effective. Life expectancies have increased. Heart surgeries, which many of us know.... All of us in this House probably know some people whose lives have been saved because of those innovations.

Health care has become more expensive, and it's what makes the public side of health care more important today than it's ever been, because those costs can come to any of us. Anyone in this House could be bankrupted if we didn't have public health insurance, because something could come along that could affect us fundamentally. That's why we need public health care. It's more important today than it's ever been. It's more important to protect its efficiencies, its equality, its justice for Canadians. It's more important.

For a government to announce in its throne speech that it is going to review public health care, that it plans to expand private health care, doesn't make any sense, and it's the wrong direction. This is a time when we need to expand public health care.

Let me say this about it. We don't need to go to Europe to find that out. We had a royal commission in this country, the Romanow commission, and they went around this country and did one of the most comprehensive reports. What did they conclude? The best way of containing some of the costs of health care is to keep the system public. The best way to control health care expenditures in the long run is to keep the system public. The best way to improve our health care system is to expand public health care, not to contract public health care.

[1050]

That's what they said. This government didn't like that answer, and it has ignored the answer ever since. But that, hopefully, is the future of public medicare in

this country. It's the Romanow commission and not the Premier's one-day trip to France.

Look, I'm not talking about a few studies. Every study, a review of 149 studies, has said that public and not-for-profit health care is more efficient and gives a higher quality of care than private health care in the United States. That's what it shows. This isn't me talking. It's the Canadian Health Services Research Foundation, funded by governments, including the government opposite.

Every study that's talked about the creation of a parallel private system says that it increased wait-lists. The Premier is not going to find out anything different in France no matter where his brother-in-law guides him. Every study shows that.

So as a society, it seems to me that we have to act now. You know, what I talked about when I said what makes my community great is a sense of people working together, a sense of people coming together from all different parts of the world and supporting each other. This government believes in a world of division where the few benefit and the rest of us have to struggle along. Well, there are very few people in society wealthy enough to hire security guards to protect themselves from society's ills. The rest of us have to live together.

That means doing what this budget didn't do: improving our public education system and giving young people access to all of the opportunities of the future; improving public health care so it will be sustainable and so that the life expectancy and the health of people in our province continue to improve; and improving the lot of people in poverty today and having a plan to engage that issue and to reduce it so that all children — not just some children — have access to everything our society has to offer. All of us need to do this.

This is our problem as a society. That's what the people who live in Vancouver-Kingsway sent me here to say. That's what they all said. They wanted me to fight for a society of equality of opportunity for all. I'm honoured to do it.

Hon. I. Chong: I'm pleased to rise to speak on the budget, as I am every time I get an opportunity.

It's interesting to listen to the members opposite, and I've heard from a number of them about: "Let's park the '90s; let's not talk about the '90s." Yet on the other hand, they keep saying: "Let's go back. Let's go back." Well, if you don't want to talk about the '90s, I don't know why you want to keep talking about going back.

What they want to do is take us back to 2001 where they can pick up where they left off and continue to drive the economy down — down to number ten and stay at number ten. Well, we're not going to let that happen. We're going to stay at number one where we are now.

When the NDP formed government in 1991, they had the number-one economy. Things were on the upswing. But by the time they left, they left it in the number-ten place. We said we would turn things around, and we

have. We said jobs would come back to this province, investment would come back to this province, and it has. But what they did in the '90s.... They drove investment out. They drove jobs out, and the only business and industry that flourished in the '90s was the moving-van business.

People, and young people in particular, were heading out. To hear the member from Kingsway talk about having opportunity.... Well, where is the opportunity when there are no jobs? Where is the opportunity when there is no business? Where is the opportunity when there is no investment? But that's what they would have you believe — that they want people to have opportunity.

[1055]

Well, you better have a strong economy, you better have jobs, and you better have an ability for people to stay in this province. That's what we're going to do, and that's what Budget 2006 is building on.

You know, Madam Speaker, I remember when I first came to this place in 1996. Shortly thereafter, when things started going bad for the NDP.... I know the member from Kingsway knows, because he was working for the then Premier, Mr. Glen Clark, at the time. The one item they blamed the economy on — the spiral downward — the one thing they kept pointing out was the Asian meltdown, the tech meltdown.

An Hon. Member: Asian flu.

Hon. I. Chong: Well, they called it the Asian flu, but it was a meltdown, they said. That was the one thing they kept talking about for the next four years.

[H. Bloy in the chair.]

Well, let me tell you something. From 2001 when we were elected to the time of 2005 in our first term, we went through 9/11, through the avian flu, through BSE. We saw our Canadian dollar rise, and we got SARS. Every industry....

Interjection.

Hon. I. Chong: And softwood lumber.

Every segment of our industry was affected, yet what happened? We put in good, sound fiscal management. We gave confidence to investors and to the bond-rating agencies such that the economy was able to turn around. You might not want to believe this, but the facts are the facts. That government, the NDP, saw our credit rating downgraded. We saw the credit rating upgraded.

You might want to stay insulated to what's going on in British Columbia, but you have to look outside the borders. You have to look beyond B.C. borders, because those are the people who are going to judge us. They're going to judge our economic performance; they're going to judge our fiscal performance. They're saying we're doing a good job in British Columbia. That's why investment is back. That's why we got the

credit upgrades. That's why we also got a Conference Board of Canada ranking in our health outcomes as number one in Canada — not number ten, number one.

Budget 2006 is good for B.C. because it builds on a plan. It builds on a vision. It pays particular attention to one segment of our society, and that is the children. Budget 2005, the update last year, was built around the seniors, and as the Minister of Finance has said, this is about taking one budget after another and building on it — unlike what the NDP did. They talk about having a plan and having a vision. Well, I was here for those years, and in 1996 or 2001 there was never a plan, never a vision.

The only thing they did have — but it kept changing all the time — was a so-called debt management plan, which then became a debt economic plan. It went through five or six different iterations. Even so, it was supposed to be a plan, but they never kept to the plan, and they never once made the targets that they wanted to do in that plan. All they did in terms of debt was double it in their time in government.

We have not been in office for as long as their first term in office. We have been here for almost five years. In their first term, their first full five years, they had done more damage to this province — which is what brought me to these chambers — from '91 to '96. If I had felt things were going well, I would have stayed working in my accounting practice. I would have stayed on as a councillor. But I saw things happening in this province, and I just couldn't sit still.

I hear members opposite say they were brought here to this chamber because the people wanted them to come and express their views and bring their concerns here. Well, we all did that as well. We all did that in the '90s, because we saw that things were going terribly wrong. Someone had to step forward and make a difference, and we did. We made a difference, and we're going to continue to make a difference.

In the '90s there were no new nurse training spaces. In fact, there was a reduction. There were no new doctor training spaces. We've got a plan to double that. It's happening. People talk about health care as being important, and it is important, but you need your doctors, your nurses to be in the facilities to take care of people. If you're driving them out of the province to Abu Dhabi and other places, then how are we going to have the services that we need? You have to encourage them. You have to encourage them to stay.

[1100]

When I was elected in 1996.... A year after I was elected, I had six nursing students attend my constituency office. I know we're all going to have examples, but the opposition needs to hear this. Six nursing students asked me what I thought was going to happen to the health care system, because they wanted to know what their future was going to be in British Columbia.

At the end of the discussion, I said, "Well, I'm not in government; I'm in opposition. I'll speak up for you, but you're going to have to wait and see what that NDP government does" — which was very little. At the

end of the discussion, they said: "You know, we didn't know what was going to happen, but we kind of have made up our minds. Five of us are not staying; one of us is staying."

Well, things have changed. Since we've increased the nursing spaces in our first term in government and with what we've done to encourage nursing spaces to be here, we have seen over 90 percent of those nurses trained in British Columbia stay in British Columbia. That's important.

The status quo is no longer going to work. We have to ensure that people around this province, British Columbians, understand that. We are in a new century with new technology, with new ways of providing services, and we have to take advantage of that.

I would like to be able to continue, and I will continue in a moment. But if I could just yield the floor for a moment to my colleague.

Hon. M. de Jong: I seek leave to make an introduction.

Leave granted.

Introductions by Members

Hon. M. de Jong: In the gallery today watching this scintillating debate on the budget are 60 grade five students from the great King Traditional School in school district 34, Abbotsford. They are travelling with, I think, 30-some-odd parents. Their teachers Ms. Rasti and Mr. Goulet are with them, and I hope the House will make all of these grade five students feel welcome.

Debate Continued

Hon. I. Chong: I know how important it is when we have visitors to this chamber that we have an opportunity to acknowledge them, so I appreciate the fact we were able to do so.

I've heard time and time again from members opposite about cuts to health care, cuts to education, and it's becoming quite tiresome. If you take a look at the real facts, if you take a look at the record, if you take a look at all the budgets that have been presented since 2001, you'll see that that is not the case. I don't know what kind of rose-coloured glasses they're wearing, but when we took office in 2001, the budget then for health care was about \$9.5 billion. Within two months, and even less than that, I believe — in less than two months — when we had a chance to look at the books, right away the Health Ministry officials said: "We're going to be short about \$700 million right away." We were not even three months into the new fiscal year, so that shows what kind of budgeting was done.

We had to put the dollars in there. Every year since 2001 the health care budget has increased to the point where it's approaching \$12 billion. That is a sizable increase. For members opposite to say that there has been a cut to the health care budget is very disingenu-

ous of them all. I would hope that at some point they would at least acknowledge there has been an increase.

I also heard members of the opposition on many occasions — well, there are only a few that are here from the '90s — who used to say: "Well, we have the highest per-capita spending in health care." Well, if you take a look at the increase we've provided but not necessarily the increase in the population that has occurred, we also still have the highest spending in health care per capita.

In terms of education, and I know this is important to everyone.... They also talk about education spending. That budget has increased every single year, and in this 2006 budget it is still increasing, even in times of student enrolment that is declining. Therefore, an increase is occurring — again, the highest ever in terms of per-capita spending per student.

Those are the facts. They're not myths. We're not trying to mislead anyone. I don't understand why the opposition is trying to do so. The books are there; you can take a look at them. We have three-year fiscal plans, three-year service plans — the first time ever — that are out there, so you can actually look out and see what government's plan and vision are for British Columbians.

You may want to disagree; that's fine. That's certainly in your purview to do so, but you cannot dismiss the truth and the fact. The fact is that health care spending, education, are at their highest level ever. We're very proud of that fact.

[1105]

As I said, we have seen this province change in so many ways in five years. We've come to be a leader in so many ways. We've been acknowledged around the world as being leaders in so many ways. I can tell you that when we had an economy that was on life support, there was no hope. There was despair. But we've seen that change.

I've talked to young people. I've talked to a lot of young people who are especially looking for jobs in the trades and in construction. They see that these are some pretty good years ahead, and they're prepared to continue working so they can build a lifestyle for their family. They can build homes, and they want to stay here.

I know that people will talk about the fact that we've got high commodity prices and things like that, which have created a surplus, and I won't dispute that. Yes, there have been some high commodity prices that have allowed us to have a surplus. But unlike the NDP, who took one-time surpluses and then tried to put it out into a program with no sustainability, we have been much more responsible. What we've done is put the surplus aside for one-time use, which is why the Minister of Finance has been able to put out a bonus for the bargaining sectors that will be taking place. But should that not be taken up, that will be put down on debt. I would think taxpayers around the province would think that's a good thing.

The fact is that going out into the next three years, the budgets that have been prepared are prepared such

that there is a revenue stream that will support those programs — as opposed to what the NDP did in their last budget, when they balanced their budget. I'm not going to dispute that, either, because the Auditor General said that happened. But when they balanced their budget, it was a one-year budget with no sustainability — new programs, new services, but still no vision, no plan. That is not the way we should treat our British Columbians. That is not the way they have come to expect to be treated, and that is not the way we are treating them.

We were reduced to a have-not status when the NDP were in government. We are coming out of that have-not status. That is another important and significant position that British Columbia has put itself in. It has taken a lot of time and a lot of work, but our job is not done. That is one of the reasons why British Columbians re-elected a B.C. Liberal government for a second term. They saw that we had a vision, they saw that we had a plan for sustainability, they saw that we made progress, and they saw that there was leadership. Those are fundamentally the reasons why we are here again.

We will continue to build on a plan that brings about sound fiscal management while protecting health care and education, and we'll also ensure that we have a revitalized economy so that jobs are plentiful for young people. As has been said many times, now we have more jobs than there are people. In the '90s there were more people for the very few jobs that existed.

I know members of the opposition are going to be touring around the province, as they should do. I did that, too, when I was in opposition. I visited towns, and I saw the depression that took place. Their towns were going through difficult times because the economy was bad, and I saw some of the needs they had. But when I spoke with people, they said: "You have got to turn things around. You have got to get some hope back into our small towns and our villages."

That is happening. We know that having a good budget, being fiscally responsible, having prudent management.... We know that people are seeing that we are applying common sense, and they know that hard work does in the end pay off.

B.C. has regained its position. We're a leader in job growth, we're a leader in housing starts, and we're a leader in construction permits. We're a leader in retail sales, and we're a leader in consumer and business confidence. Doesn't it feel great? Maybe I can get the other members on the opposite side to say that. How does it feel to be a leader as opposed to a failure? It feels good on this side. It feels pretty good. It feels good to lead.

[1110]

It's not very nice to have to follow, and it's not good to be the laughingstock of the country, where other jurisdictions talk about British Columbia failing. That's what happened in the '90s. You need only look at a number of the articles, international articles. Again, you insulate yourself in these borders. You don't see

what people are saying. We cannot just survive on our own, unto our own little province. We need to have trade with other jurisdictions. We need to expand our horizons with other jurisdictions. We can only do so when we gain their respect, and we are doing that.

British Columbians are excited. They're excited about making plans for the future. Many of them are talking about 2010 and beyond, and that's exciting. I don't think they ever talked about it that way before. We know that what we presented in our first budget of last year, of 2005, and in this budget of 2006, gives them hope. It gives them opportunity. What's more important, it says that this is a government that is continually committed to making sure that British Columbia stays and remains a leader in many, many ways.

Last February, last year, before the election, we brought out five great goals that we want to achieve. These five great goals are not meant to be achieved in a year or in a month or in a week. These are five great goals that will span and be achieved over a decade. Some will be achieved sooner. Others will take a bit longer. I ask members of the opposition to work with us to achieve them. I don't understand how they would not want these five great goals to be achieved.

How would they not want B.C. to be the best-educated, most literate jurisdiction on the continent? Why would they not want that for their communities, for their citizens? Why would they not support us in our budget, where we see an increase in the K-to-12 education spending? Why would they not support us when they see \$2.4 billion for post-secondary institutions, new or expanded institutions? Why would they not support us with 25,000 new post-secondary spaces around the province?

Goal two: to lead the way in North America in healthy living and physical fitness. Why would they not want to support us in seeing that happen? Why would they not want to ensure that people live healthy, long lives and are physically fit, so that the diseases that are out there and prevalent don't afflict so many families? Our budget, again, provides an additional \$301 million funding for health care. That's nearly \$2 billion in new funding over the next three years. Why would they not want to support that?

I know there has been a lot of talk, as well, about beds for seniors, long-term care beds and that. I would agree we want to see a variety of housing options for our seniors — residential, assisted-living, supportive housing. All these are important, and that's why there are dollars made available for that.

I know the members opposite will bring up case after case, and I will concede that that is certainly their right to do. But let me share with you one of my stories from when I was in opposition. I had a family who came to see me, whose mother had been on a wait-list for over a year and a half. When she was first put on the wait-list, she could have lived independently, but by the time she was told that she was at the very top of the wait-list, she had deteriorated terribly, to the point that her dementia was starting to kick in. Then — insult to injury — she was on the very top of the list,

ready to go into the next unit, when she was bumped yet again. That's when the family came to see me. It took another six months, but through the work of my office, we were able to get her a placement.

I haven't brought those stories forward.... We know that the health care demands are always going to be out there in our communities, but for the members of the opposition to say that this has happened overnight or in the last four years is simply wrong. It was there in the '90s — '95, '96, '97 — all the way up to 2001. Worse yet, when I visited some of these long-term care facilities and went into these three- and four-bed wards, where you see seniors who first entered these places when they were in their 70s and were still there 20 years later in their 90s, who, when they first entered, were still somewhat independent but now had to use walkers.... To see three people in their walkers lining up to use the one washroom in that ward, because that was the way it was set up....

[1115]

To listen to the opposition, it would almost appear that they wanted us to build 5,000 beds the way they had built them: as four- and three-bed wards. That's not providing dignity to our seniors. We have changed that — providing flexibility, housing options — and I am proud of what I have seen that is showing up in my community. I have seen renovations that have taken place, and I have talked to individuals.

We never had a campus-of-care model. I have gone around the province and visited a number of cities that have now been putting in place a campus-of-care model. You start off with independent living, and you move into assisted living and supportive living and, eventually, 24-hour care. Those options were never available before, but they're there now.

I know that members of the opposition will stand up one after another, and they'll cry that the sky is falling in and this is happening and that is happening. I guess we're going to listen to them, as I know they're listening to us. But at the end of the day, what you have to remember is that we have an aging population. Currently, one in seven individuals in this province is age 65 and older, but in 25 years that ratio will change to one in four.

As I mentioned when I gave my throne speech response, those of us here who may be in our 40s or 50s and who have a senior parent in their 60s or 70s will also be a senior while our parent is a senior. Our needs will be different, and we had better find a way to meet those needs. That's what we're doing by having a variety of options.

Our third goal was to build the best system of support in Canada for persons with disabilities, special needs, children at risk and seniors. Our Budget 2006, in fact, is doing that. By adding \$421 million over the next four years, that is going to go a long way to the well-being of vulnerable children, as well as to children in general. It also means more supports for caregivers, more support for family members.

The fact that we're going to continue to build on the work of the crystal meth secretariat — that's important.

In the '90s crystal meth was not a drug that was well talked about. There were other drugs, I'm sure, that were the drugs of the day that were a problem. But crystal meth has taken such a hold of our children and even our young adults, and it has so quickly become a scourge that we have to deal with it. The fact that we put additional dollars into the crystal meth secretariat to look for solutions and to raise awareness so that we can stop this scourge is important.

The fact that we've brought in some tax reductions for homeowners, as well, providing \$309 million over the next four years to improve the homeowner grant program, is another good, positive step here.

We know that another goal we had was to lead the world in sustainable environmental management with the best air and water quality and best fisheries management. That, too, is reflected in our budget of 2006. The living rivers trust fund will be enhanced by \$14 million, tripling the province's commitment. As well, \$30 million will go towards support for the coastal first nations conservation economic development opportunities. An additional \$113 million will help reforest areas devastated by the mountain pine beetle and support increased beetle timber harvest levels.

Finally, our fifth goal — and we're well on the way to meeting this goal — is to create more jobs per capita than anywhere else in Canada. You know that this is definitely happening when we say that we have more jobs than there are people. But we cannot rest on our laurels. We cannot just sit idly by, because when you have more jobs than people and people not filling them, you have another problem. That is why we are expanding opportunities for skills and training development with an additional \$400 million over four years.

That also includes the very successful BladeRunners program that everyone has been talking about. I'm glad this is the one program that people on both sides of the House agree is important and needed to be expanded. Again, if it was that important back when the NDP were in government, why did they not expand it even greater when they were in office? They didn't, because perhaps there weren't enough jobs available. That's not happening now. We have the jobs, so we want the training. We want to expand this and take it around the province.

[1120]

BladeRunners is an excellent program, I'm happy to say. It's housed in our ministry. We're going to continue to monitor that, and we're going to see how that can be expanded and how the program evolves around the province. It certainly is going to be very welcome news to places such as Prince George.

We're also going to be providing more opportunities for women through a mentoring program. There have been women who have been out of the workplace for far too long — for their own choices. They may have stayed home or they've had other family reasons, but I have heard from women who've said: "It is time for me to come back to the workforce. I've been gone for ten years."

In ten years things have changed. The way we communicate — some have to upgrade their computer skills. Some have to have more training in how an office environment works. We're going to be working through that on a mentoring program so that women who want to re-enter the workforce feel comfortable. These could be mature women, as well, who are in their — I'm hoping again not to offend anyone, but mature women — 50s and 60s who want to come back into the workforce, who have been gone for so long. There is an opportunity, as I say, because we have more jobs.

A good testament of success is the unemployment rate, and British Columbia's unemployment rate is the lowest in 30 years. That's more than half my life. It's just about the time I came out and had my first job. So I guess from the time I graduated to now, we're back to where I was when I graduated, when it was the lowest unemployment. I do remember when I first came out of high school there were plenty of jobs and there were plenty of opportunities, but that did change over the '90s. We're back there, where the unemployment rate is the lowest it has been in 30 years.

I want to just remark that here in Greater Victoria and the capital region area the unemployment rate is even lower. It's closer to something like 4 percent. By providing for ESL training, that's going to mean new immigrants will have an opportunity to enter the workforce as quickly as possible.

What I can say about this budget is that it has a positive impact on British Columbians. It has a positive impact on communities around the province, so of course it has a positive impact on my riding of Oak Bay-Gordon Head. I know that over the next number of years we're going to continue to see improvements in a variety of services and programs. We're building on the strengths of our communities, and that's what I'm particularly proud of.

I just want to say, before I sit down, that it's important that all members really look at the budget in the closest way possible, reach and grind down into those numbers that they want to, because I did that when I was in opposition. I don't expect anything less of this opposition, but they have to take a look, see and admit that the numbers speak for themselves. The numbers show the two key areas of importance that everyone speaks about, health care and education, have gone up, and they will continue to go up.

You know, this isn't the '90s, and I say thank goodness for that. The '90s saw too much despair. This is the 21st century. This is the century where we're going to see hope, opportunity, prosperity, progress and leadership all restored to this province. We are going to see that this province continues to lead well beyond 2010, well beyond many of us being here. But we have to make sure that happens by setting the pace now. We have to make sure that happens by making sure that those fundamental principles are in place.

When we took office, we had heard a rumour out there that members of the NDP government of the day had said that they were going to scramble things so

badly that we couldn't unscramble them. We have started to unscramble them. B.C. is back.

K. Conroy: I rise today in response to the government's budget. Last Tuesday the Finance Minister delivered this government's seventh budget. There is no evidence of subsidiarity in this latest budget, no evidence of greater accountability. In fact, if anything, there is evidence of even greater centralized control of government from within the Premier's office.

[1125]

The Premier's office was the recipient of the single greatest budget increase over the next three years: 40 percent. While Treasury Board refused to increase the budget for B.C.'s independent Auditor General — a mere \$500,000 request — it granted the Premier's office another \$1.7 million increase every year for the next three years. I think too many ministries are being run from the Premier's office.

The budget was disappointing for many other reasons as well. But it was most disappointing to average British Columbians looking for some relief — a fact that has been brought up by my constituents that I have talked to back home in my constituency. The passenger from North Vancouver that I sat next to on a flight from Penticton or the mom that I have been talking to who is trying to make ends meet finding good, quality child care — none of them are feeling the benefits talked about in this budget.

This government had the opportunity to plan for B.C.'s future and to help make life more affordable for average families — the people who, as the Finance Minister herself acknowledged in her budget speech, paid the highest price over the past five years. Unfortunately, in many respects, she missed that opportunity.

For years British Columbians have seen big increases in the cost of living. In the name of budget restraint, the government delivered hikes in user fees and declining services. Increases in tuition fees, fuel taxes, MSP premiums, prescription drugs, hunting and fishing licences, hydro costs, auto insurance — all have made life more expensive for people in my constituency.

By providing no relief from these user fees and consumption taxes, this budget fails to make a real difference for people in West Kootenay-Boundary. There was some targeted tax relief for business, a position on taxes that we generally support. But what was missing was any relief from the consumption taxes and fee increases that have characterized the current government's approach to fiscal management. The homeowner's grant increase was a symbolic effort but not very effective when we look at the increases in property taxes, which the grant increase won't cover.

This latest budget offers very little in the way of long-term planning or vision for our province's future. With record windfall revenues from resources, British Columbians expected more from this government than the status quo. This budget, in fact, contains nearly \$1.8 billion in discretionary funds with no accountability for how that money will be used.

Citizens deserve a say in how their tax dollars are being spent. For example, cities, towns and villages facing mill closures and forest restructuring will find little in this budget to help. How many more Midways will this government be dealing with? There is no strategy to help resource communities struggling with the downturn in the forest industry. A transition funding program that is there one day is gone the next. We had to push the Ministry of Community Services to ensure the transition funding stayed in the community of Midway after they cancelled it. Where is the well-planned transition program in that situation? It's here today, gone tomorrow and back again with pressure from the opposition. Communities shouldn't have to go through this turmoil in times of crises.

We need to start long-term investment now to ensure economic diversification opportunities are there when communities will need them most. Communities like Grand Forks are struggling to retain their industries — industries like Canpar, who certainly aren't feeling the economic benefits in this province. They are competing with big-box stores with cheap imports from China, while they have some of the most environmentally sound products in the country. They sell custom-routed doors that are found in offices and homes throughout North America. There are only two manufacturing plants like this in Canada: one in Ontario, and one in Grand Forks — Canpar. The Ontario plant gets grants from the Ontario government — but not in B.C. Economic benefits need to be shared across the province for all British Columbians.

[1130]

The government did not put forward a coherent plan to address child care demands or rising child poverty and homelessness rates. This budget still assumes Prime Minister Harper will fund the national child care plan. We know that won't happen, and I think the members opposite are finally getting it. There is no replacement, though. Families are struggling to find good, quality child care. The field is losing excellent early childhood educators to education and the health care field, where their experience and education is recognized with a living wage and decent benefits.

B.C.'s child poverty rate is also the highest in Canada. The number of homeless people in our communities has doubled. Food banks are growing. In communities that used to not have any, they now have at least one, if not two. Families with children are the most frequent users, not because they want to be there but because they have to be.

This government had a real opportunity to make a strong commitment to help. Instead, it has said it will move to a landlord subsidy program that will not help families living in poverty find safe and affordable housing; it will make unscrupulous landlords wealthier, and families will still struggle to find affordable housing.

Our province is facing an unprecedented skills shortage, but the Finance Minister's announcement around skills training misses the mark. In August 2005 the independent economic advisory council warned

the government that the shortage of skilled workers is a major threat to B.C.'s economic position. We have already seen cancelled projects and skyrocketing construction costs. The new commitments fail to make up for five years of poor management in B.C.'s training and apprenticeship programs. It was this government that cut apprenticeship funding, closed recruitment offices and completely dismantled B.C.'s trades training programs.

As a result, we are now far behind provinces like Alberta — Alberta, which has become the home for many young people from my area. People like our son, who will become a journeyman millwright this year with his Red Seal interprovincial ticket. He will be able to go anywhere in Canada and work. Will he or his friends come back to B.C., back to where the industry only wants to pay for certain skills of a tradesperson, not the entire package? I doubt it.

It was interesting to hear the member opposite from Oak Bay-Gordon Head talk about Abu Dhabi, because in fact people from Abu Dhabi are coming to Calgary, to SAIT, to look for journeymen, to look for skilled tradespersons to come to their country to work. They're not coming to B.C. They're not coming here. They're looking for skilled tradespeople in Alberta because they are some of the best in this country.

After last week's throne speech British Columbians were looking for government to provide leadership on health care. However, after everything we have heard this week and last week in this province, it has become quite obvious that there were no answers and there was no direction in this budget. This government has had years to fulfil their 5,000-bed promise to B.C. seniors. Instead, in our area we have seen tragic consequences to the cuts to long-term care beds and to acute care beds. This budget provides no certainty that B.C. seniors will ever get those additional beds. We are seeing the effects every day in our hospitals.

Recent stories of seniors being separated from their spouses, taken from their communities without the consent of their physician or families, have become symbolic of many of the current government's failures in health care: seniors in acute care beds without adequate levels of care; long waits for surgery; crises in emergency services; hallway beds in busy regional hospitals, which they never used to have; management chaos at local health authorities; senior management staff not speaking to the Deputy Minister of Health as she undertakes a major review in the region.

The last budget was called the seniors budget, but seniors and their families have realized that just calling a budget a seniors budget does nothing in real terms to help. The families in our area who have lost loved ones as they struggle to deal with separation, the families who should have had support, care and compassion as they dealt with the loss of their parents, their grandma, grandpa, aunt or uncle.... It's just criminal.

[1135]

My condolences to the families of Fanny Albo, Elmer Hall, Dave Murrell, Freda Plested and Ferdinand Schneider. The health care system has failed you, and

your courage in sharing your tragic stories with the public has already benefited others. Today I have learned that two seniors who were moved away have now been returned to their home communities, so Win Guesford's and Bill Johnson's families thank you, and I thank you for your courage.

What is wrong with the system, a system that disregards the wishes of a family or of a fragile senior who only wants to spend the last days of their lives in the community they contributed to all their lives with their families beside them? There are other families who are struggling to deal with the trauma of an aging relative and have not the resources to support that struggle — families like the Lesys of Robson. Maurice is in a first-available bed in New Denver; Vicky is at home. She must travel a four-hour return trip to visit him. She requires dialysis three times a day, has osteoporosis and can't have Maurice at home. She doesn't drive and has to rely on others. She tells me it's dementia and a heart attack that are robbing her of her Rock of Gibraltar. He doesn't understand why he can't be with her. The stress on her is taking its toll. After 55 years together they shouldn't be separated, but they are. This is not right.

Fred and Anne Fomenoff have been together for 58 years. They were happy in assisted living. They had figured out their budget so they could afford it. Fred became ill and was hospitalized and could no longer be at their home. The closest bed was in Grand Forks. Anne said to me: "Fred will die." She couldn't get to Grand Forks. She needs to see him. Well, private care was available to them at the cost of \$115 a day, \$3,400 a month. Plus she still has to pay her assisted-living rent — almost \$5,000 a month in total. For one month she said maybe she could afford it — maybe two — but no longer. What can these families do? What kind of continuum of care is this for Fred and Anne?

Other families are struggling to find the resources to keep their loved ones closer to home. Spouses are being asked by the health authority if they can't get a reverse mortgage to cover the cost of private care. "Can your children not pay?" And on it goes, but no one offers to publicly fund existing private beds.

We shouldn't have to be bringing these stories to the attention of the Minister of Health to get attention. These stories should not be happening at all. The report that was released yesterday on the tragic situation of Fanny Albo and her family lays out in detail exactly what has been said in this House last week and this week and what this government has denied. There is a crisis, and it needs to be dealt with provincially, not just in the Kootenays.

There are some interesting points in the reports, recommendations that I'm looking forward to being implemented — for instance, the review of the first-available-bed policy. Yes, it has been in our area for a long time, but it used to work because there were beds in communities. In the last five years there have been 127 beds cut from the closure of Mater Mis in Rossland and Kiro Manor in Trail. Did we need all those beds? No. Did we need to lose them all? No. Kiro needed

very little renovation to be fixed up. In fact, most folks would argue that it was just fine compared to what we have now.

Yes, we need to look at the first-available-bed policy and take into consideration all of the ramifications that are associated with the decision-making — questions like: how feasible is it for families to remain connected; what special considerations are needed for on-going medical care; identification of key decision-makers; and an appeal process for families.

Also in the last five years health watch groups have formed and been very active throughout my constituency, loudly advocating for quality health care in our region. Many of the issues they have been advocating for will hopefully be looked at with this report and dealt with by the government and the Interior Health Authority. Recommendation six, for instance — "To proceed with initiatives to effectively engage the communities of Kootenay-Boundary in their health care system" — is what I call a huge win for those hard-working groups.

[1140]

Dedicated volunteers like Marylynn Rakuson, Bob Jackson, Maureen Mitchell and Joan Reichardt, who was here in the gallery yesterday with us, will hopefully now have the opportunity to engage with the IHA, talk about their health care system — not the IHA's health care system, but the community's health care system. To quote from the report: "Their health care system." These are the people that know and understand what is happening. They hear the stories. They see the problems, and they have good, concrete solutions. They only want to be respected and engaged. They are not oppositionists. They are passionate realists who know that there are ways we can work together to fix the system.

[Mr. Speaker in the chair.]

I will quote Bob Jackson's reaction to the report: "I note that recommendation six is something that Health Watch and similar groups have been trying to get the IHA to do since it was founded. It is something that has been steadfastly refused. We can only hope that it means IHA will, in future, engage in a genuine dialogue with communities rather than simply slathering them with propaganda or refusing to release even simple statistics without an FOI request."

On that note, I also hope this report spurs the Interior Health Authority to look at its corporate makeup, to re-examine the way it manages the system, because yes, I do understand that they are dealing with a multi-million-dollar system, but they need to look at how they are managing the system. Is it a corporation? I say no. It is a health system, a health care system, where we are dealing with people, not widgets. We are dealing with families, not outcomes. The people who work in the system need to be heard. The doctors, nurses, support staff and the many volunteers all have great ideas on how the system can work better. Respect these people; talk to them; listen to them. Together we can all

have a system that can meet the needs of the Kootenays.

I was on Nightline last night with Michael Smyth, and due to the flood of calls I was asked to stay on the program longer. Were they all calls from the Kootenays? No. In fact, they were from Vancouver, Delta, Ashcroft, Clearbrook, Kelowna — not just the Kootenays. This is a systemic problem throughout the province. This government and the Minister of Health need to stand up and say: "Yes, we broke our promise to the seniors of this province. We have not built the promised 5,000 beds, and in fact, we have not provided the continuum of care that was promised."

Three years ago this government split up senior couples as a result of changes they made to the health care system. Three years ago the Premier promised it wouldn't happen again. The report released yesterday shows that the Premier broke his promise. I believe the Premier and the government owe an apology to the seniors of this province — an apology, and a commitment to finally live up to the promise of building those 5,000 long-term care beds.

I knew what I was getting into when I ran for this job. I watched my husband Ed do the job for ten years. I was not naïve about the good days and the very bad days, but nothing has prepared me for the past two weeks — the incredibly sad stories of what is happening to seniors in this province, the struggles their families are facing and the gut-wrenching stories of tragic consequences. This is why we're here, because I know that we will continue to hold this government to account. We will continue to demand promises be kept, and we will continue to give seniors in this province a voice. We will continue to demand that health care once again becomes about care and compassion, and not a corporate entity — a line item on a budget of empty promises — because what good is economic growth for a few if we don't care for our seniors, our children and our most vulnerable citizens?

I want to close and share a quote with you from Bud Godderis, a longtime area resident and former social worker at the regional hospital, a formidable and passionate advocate for many people in our area — and indeed, many other places, like Central America. Bud tells us that the health of a nation can be judged by how well it treats its elderly population. We need to do better.

[1145]

J. Nuraney: Let me begin my remarks by referring to the sad and tragic incident that the member from Kootenay has just related. It is not a very nice thing when situations or cases like that happen in our health care system, and I would like to think that this is an exception rather than the rule. I certainly hope that whatever tragic circumstances ensued on this case will be quickly remedied and will not be repeated again.

I'm pleased to stand up and support the budget of 2006. This budget rightly is called the budget for children. A major part of the allocation this time relates to the programs and support for our children in various

phases of their lives and also in various situations. The last budget dealt with the needs of our seniors. It is interesting to note that there is a deliberate design that unfolds in the attempts by the Minister of Finance to address some dire needs.

There is more money provided in our health care and also in our education. We must dispel the myth that my colleagues were talking about yesterday that we are putting no more money into health care and education. Ever since we became government — every year, each year — there has been more money put into health care and more into education.

What is also really reassuring to note is that we have once again balanced the budget, as we had promised in 2001. This time around we had the pleasant task of distributing the surplus that was earned because of the various elements that came into play. Apart from the fact that we started by offering a tax break to all citizens in our first mandate.... It was done with the firm belief that that action would initiate an economic turnaround, and that has happened. We also set into motion various initiatives to reinstate the trust and confidence that had eroded under the previous NDP government.

There is no question that we have managed our financial responsibilities very well and have proven to financial institutions that we are fiscally prudent and cautious. This gave us the ability to obtain a better rating, resulting in savings of millions of dollars in interest costs on the debt that was accumulated under the previous regime.

What I would like to emphasize this morning is the fact that we succeeded in creating the most important, intangible benefit to the province: trust and confidence, not only among the citizens of this province, but among the investing communities around the world. We saw the return of capital into various fields of endeavour like forestry, mining, business and industry. The influx of capital created unprecedented opportunities for those looking for work and also for those with creative abilities to bring forth new ideas.

We also invested large amounts of money in our institutes of higher learning to ensure that we produce the skills and talents that would be required as we enter into a new era of a high-tech and global economy. What this government has provided is the vision of how British Columbia will not only be the best place to live and work, but will also be a great contributor and a player in the future global market.

[1150]

Vision without courage is futile. Our Premier and this government have taken some very courageous and bold actions to ensure that our vision is realistic and manageable: the Gateway project; the creation of 26,000 more seats in our universities and colleges; investment in the future of our children; finding more innovative ways to make our health care system sustainable; providing a better climate for investment by the business community; and creating a better relationship with our first nations communities — a relationship, if I may say so, of trust and confidence.

These are unprecedented initiatives that will ensure a better future for all British Columbians.

Let me tell you also, Mr. Speaker, that Burnaby has been a great beneficiary in this economic arena. Burnaby has experienced a huge construction boom, both in residential and commercial markets. It has also now become the nucleus of high-tech and biotech companies. BCIT and SFU have both seen growth in their student population and in investment. Burnaby has truly become a buoyant and exciting city.

Let me end my remarks by saying that a balanced approach is as important as a balanced budget. Our Minister of Finance has truly accomplished this very important principle.

Hon. C. Richmond: Noting the time and the lack of further speakers at the moment, I move the House do now adjourn.

Mr. Speaker: We'll move adjournment of debate first.

Hon. C. Richmond: Oh, the former speaker didn't move adjournment of the debate first, so I do that now, Mr. Speaker.

Hon. C. Richmond moved adjournment of debate.

Motion approved.

Hon. C. Richmond moved adjournment of the House.

Motion approved.

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

The House adjourned at 11:52 a.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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