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LIEUTENANT-GOVERNOR
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SECOND SESSION, 38TH PARLIAMENT

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Honourable Bill Barisoff

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THURSDAY, MAY 4, 2006

The House met at 10:02 a.m.

Prayers.

Introduction and First Reading of Bills

REPRESENTATIVE FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH ACT

Hon. W. Oppal presented a message from His Honour the Administrator: a bill intituled Representative for Children and Youth Act.

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

Motion approved.

Hon. W. Oppal: I am pleased to introduce Bill 34. The purpose of this bill is to establish authority for the Legislative Assembly to appoint the representative for children and youth as an independent officer of the Legislature to improve services for children, youth and families in British Columbia.

This bill follows through on the recommendations provided by the Hon. Mr. Ted Hughes in his recent report to government. Consistent with those recommendations, this new office builds upon the strong foundation laid by the child and youth officer and other relevant offices by creating an expanded and improved framework that will provide better and expanded advocacy opportunities to foster improvements to our system of services for children, youth and their families.

It will provide for the independent review and investigation of deaths and critical injuries that occur within the child welfare system, and it will provide for a strong system of accountability to the public through independent public reporting. Under this new model, the representative will have the full discretion to advocate for children and will be able to initiate reviews and investigations and to release reports independent from government and uniquely focused on the child welfare system.

[1005]

As an independent officer of the Legislature, the new representative will be appointed by the Legislative Assembly on the unanimous recommendation of an all-party special committee of the Legislature.

The bill also establishes the role of an all-party Select Standing Committee on Children and Youth that will work with the representative in fostering greater awareness and understanding of the child welfare system, as recommended by the Hughes report.

Under this bill, the Select Standing Committee on Children and Youth will also be responsible for receiving and reviewing service plans, annual reports and ongoing reports from the representative, and it can offer individual cases to the representative to investigate when deemed appropriate.

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 34, Representative for Children and Youth 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.

Orders of the Day

Hon. M. de Jong: In this chamber, I call committee stage of Bill 31, and in Section A, for the information of members, it's Committee of Supply, estimates of the Ministry of Forests and Range.

Committee of the Whole House

PUBLIC SAFETY AND SOLICITOR GENERAL STATUTES AMENDMENT ACT, 2006

The House in Committee of the Whole (Section B) on Bill 31; S. Hawkins in the chair.

The committee met at 10:08 a.m.

Hon. S. Hagen: I seek leave to make an introduction.

Leave granted.

Introductions by Members

Hon. S. Hagen: It's my pleasure today to introduce to the members of the Legislature 28 grades five and six students, several parents and teacher Ms. Twin from Royston Elementary School. They've travelled here today from Royston, British Columbia, which is located in the beautiful Comox Valley, to visit the precincts.

I ask the House to make them all welcome, and I thank Ms. Twin and the students for joining us today.

Debate Continued

Sections 1 to 5 inclusive approved.

On section 6.

[1010]

G. Gentner: I would like to move an amendment to section 6:

[by adding the following paragraph to section 28(1)(c):
(m) Any appeal by a grieving affected local government to decisions made in Section 5 and Section 6 (1) shall be referred to a third party review board as prescribed by the Union of BC Municipalities and paid for by the host municipality.]

On the amendment.

Hon. J. Les: Having had a brief opportunity to review the proposed amendment, we feel that there is

nothing particularly useful that is contributed by the amendment. The dispute resolution process that is envisaged in the particular section, we feel, is very adequate to resolve any issues that might arise between the various jurisdictions.

[1015]

Amendment negated on division.

Sections 6 to 8 inclusive approved.

On section 9.

J. Brar: Section 9 amends and strikes out the word "immediately." I would like to ask: what is the prescribed time line to deliver notice to the general manager once the word "immediately" is removed?

Hon. J. Les: The new requirement will actually be that that notification be provided in advance.

J. Brar: I'm sorry; if the minister could clarify the response again. Is there any time line for that, or is there any description of time line? This amendment suggests, of course, a huge change, which is removing the word "immediately," and then it could be endless time for that.

Hon. J. Les: I thought I had illustrated that fairly clearly, but I will try again. The current provisions are that a change takes place and there is immediate notification thereafter. I think that's inherent in the word "immediately." The change will provide for notification to be provided in advance — that is, before the change takes place. We feel that is a more responsible way to proceed in these matters.

Sections 9 and 10 approved.

On section 11.

J. Brar: Can the minister describe what it means by "reasonable grounds" under section 11, "Seizure of gaming supplies," 82.1?

Hon. J. Les: I think that when you read section 82.1, you need to look at the entire context. This contemplates a peace officer acting pursuant to a warrant, which will have been issued by a court. Of course, as always, a peace officer is required to use their best discretion when exercising the terms and conditions of such a warrant. I think that is exactly what is being described here.

J. Brar: Under section 82.3, which talks about detention and forfeiture of gaming supplies, we do have the Civil Forfeiture Act as well. Can the minister clarify how these two differ — this situation with the act that we already have, the Civil Forfeiture Act?

[1020]

Hon. J. Les: I appreciate the question from the member opposite in terms of how the operation of this

section differs from civil forfeiture proceedings, for example. Civil forfeiture proceedings, as the member will recall from the discussion we had last fall, contemplate unlawful activities taking place, and civil forfeiture proceedings result from that unlawful activity. The Civil Forfeiture Act clearly lays out how one proceeds.

This act is somewhat different in that it potentially, for example, contemplates activities that have not been authorized or that are proceeding outside of regulation. I would suggest to the member that there is a distinction between those definitions and acts that are unlawful.

J. Brar: I do understand that there must be a distinction between the Civil Forfeiture Act and the definition of "forfeiture of gaming supplies." But there could be illegal activities out of the gaming supplies which could fall under the Civil Forfeiture Act. I think if the minister can define it a bit more clearly as to how these two things separate — the boundaries when it comes to regulation of these two things.

Sections 11 to 72 inclusive approved.

Title approved.

Hon. J. Les: I move that the committee rise and report the bill complete without amendment.

Motion approved.

The committee rose at 10:24 a.m.

The House resumed; Mr Speaker in the chair.

Report and Third Reading of Bills

PUBLIC SAFETY AND SOLICITOR GENERAL STATUTES AMENDMENT ACT, 2006

Bill 31, Public Safety and Solicitor General Statutes Amendment Act, 2006, reported complete without amendment, read a third time and passed.

[1025]

Hon. G. Abbott: I call second reading on Bill 33.

Second Reading of Bills

EDUCATION (LEARNING ENHANCEMENT) STATUTES AMENDMENT ACT, 2006

Hon. S. Bond: Hon. Speaker, I move that Bill 33 be read a second time now.

This act introduces legislative changes that will set out new steps for improving student achievement by establishing smaller classes and increasing accountability. That's in the context of record funding. These changes address class size and composition in British

Columbia schools and fulfil our throne speech commitment to ensure that all school districts live within the class size limits that are established in law.

Amendments to the School Act will also define and recognize distributed learning and help school boards offer more choice to students who are taking their courses on line. Amendments to the Teaching Profession Act will enable the B.C. College of Teachers to collect statistical information relating to teacher competence and performance.

[S. Hawkins in the chair.]

Our government has set itself an ambitious goal to make British Columbia the best-educated, most literate jurisdiction on the continent. In order to reach that goal, we are focusing on the core values that we committed to during last year's election: the values of excellence, choice, accountability and achievement. We also committed to providing increased flexibility and choice in public schools because we know that when students are interested in their education, they do much better.

We committed to increasing parental involvement because we know that when parents are actively involved in their children's education, students are much more likely to be successful. We also committed to requiring annual public reports on class size, and we acted on that. In fact, in February we released the first-ever report on class sizes in British Columbia public schools.

The report was the most comprehensive information on class size and composition ever collected and published in this province, and it showed that many classes were a reasonable size but that some were not. The report also showed that 15 school districts were not in compliance with the provincial average class size legislation in at least one category. Clearly, there was a demonstrated need for a mechanism to enforce class size legislation.

Class size and composition were also central to the two-week illegal strike last fall by the B.C. Teachers Federation. As part of the dispute resolution, Industrial Inquiry Commissioner Vince Ready prepared a report that addressed the issue of class size and composition. His report called for government to provide an additional \$20 million to the 2005-2006 fiscal year entirely targeted to class size and composition.

Government accepted Mr. Ready's recommendations unconditionally. The additional \$20 million resulted in an additional 540 teachers being hired in schools across British Columbia. Mr. Ready's report also acknowledged the value of the Learning Roundtable, where representatives of parents, teachers, trustees, superintendents, principals and vice-principals could work to find solutions to issues like class size and composition.

Mr. Ready has since issued an interim report on bargaining, in which he strongly recommended that the round table continue in discussions on class size and composition. In fact, we have. Last week the Learning Roundtable met for the fifth time. The meet-

ing was significant in that there were clearly areas where there was a consensus. The parties were able to agree on some important things, like the fact that school boards should be held responsible for complying with the legislation contained in the School Act.

[H. Bloy in the chair.]

We were also able to agree that decisions about class size and composition should involve consultation, but there was still not consensus about how to deal specifically with class size numbers. In fact, there were a variety of viewpoints. Parents, teachers and members of the public can see the discussion that takes place at the round table by looking at the minutes of those meetings.

The minutes are made public. They're available on the Ministry of Education's website. There is a Learning Roundtable icon on the home page. I encourage people to look at the different views that were expressed at the round table. They're clearly captured in the minutes that have been posted there.

[1030]

At this point, that brings us to the legislation that is before the House today. The changes to the School Act we are introducing will provide for smaller classes, increased accountability and more consultation for parents and teachers.

The amendments set out the following:

(1) New class size limits for grades four through seven and for students with special needs, as well as new requirements for consulting and reporting, and a mechanism to ensure that boards comply with legislation.

Under the amended legislation, the class size maximum for grades four through seven is 30 students, except with the consent of the classroom teacher and the approval of the principal and district superintendent. The rationale for any exception must be made public. The district average class size for grades four through seven must not exceed 28 students.

The maximum number of students with special needs in a classroom cannot exceed three, except with the approval of the principal and the superintendent, and must include prior consultation with the classroom teacher.

The districtwide average class size maximum for grades eight through 12 will remain at 30 students. However, no class in grades eight through 12 will exceed 30 students, except with the approval of the principal and the superintendent and, again, with prior consultation with the classroom teacher. Once again, the rationale for any exception must be made public.

The school principal must consult with the school planning council on class organization within 15 days of the start of the school year. A superintendent must also verify that the school district is in compliance with class size legislation and submit a report on the organization of all classes to the school board and the district parent advisory council on or before October 1 of each year.

The school board must then review the superintendent's report at a public meeting on or before October 15 each year and then send a copy of that report to the Minister of Education. The school board will be able to decide whether to accept the report, or they may instruct the superintendent to revise the report. In that case, the report must be returned to the board within 15 days.

If a school board fails to comply with the class size and composition requirements, the province will appoint a special administrator, and if a school board fails to follow the direction of a special administrator, the board may be dissolved and an official trustee appointed to conduct the affairs of the school district.

(2) A requirement that boards enter into an agreement with the ministry in order to offer distributed learning courses.

These changes fulfil a throne speech commitment to provide students in this province with more choice and to make public education more relevant to our students' interests and their goals. Under the amended legislation, public school students in grades ten through 12 who are receiving instruction via distributed learning may enrol and take courses from more than one school board, the Francophone Education Authority or, in fact, from funded independent schools. This will enable the government to initiate a new virtual school to provide B.C. students with new options for learning that are accessible from their schools, from their homes, wherever they live in the province of British Columbia.

(3) Statistical information that school boards, the Francophone Education Authority and independent school authorities will be required to provide to the B.C. College of Teachers.

These organizations will be required to provide the number of reports they produce that evaluate the performance and competence of the college members they employ. They will also be required to provide the number of those reports where performance or competence was less than satisfactory.

With respect to class size and composition, this legislation addresses many of the concerns we heard at the Learning Roundtable; in our meetings with student and parent groups; and, most recently, during numerous visits to schools, to school districts and, in fact, to dozens of classrooms across the province. All of our education partners have provided valuable input, and it is obvious that each one of them wants what's best for British Columbia's students.

[1035]

It's also clear that our partners — whether it's parents, teachers, superintendents, principals, vice-principals, school trustees.... There is not necessarily agreement on the best way to improve learning conditions in our classrooms through class size and composition. For example, principals were concerned about fixed class-size limits in legislation, although they recognize that large classes in grades four to seven, and pressure points are experienced there.... That is an issue for them.

Parents expressed concern that fixed numbers in secondary schools limit student elective choices, though they had some concern about the pressure points once again, and somewhat larger classes in grades four to seven. Teachers, of course, made it clear that they support firm class-size limits in grades four through 12.

This legislation balances many of the concerns that we've heard. There was a common view that classes in grades four to seven have pressure points when it comes to class size. This legislation places firm limits on class sizes in grades four to seven.

All members of the round table agreed that there should be an enforcement mechanism for school boards that are not in compliance with class-size legislation. This legislation includes an enforcement mechanism for that class-size legislation. Round table members also agreed that parents and teachers need to be engaged in meaningful and genuine consultations about class size and composition. This legislation provides teachers with a stronger role in class-size organization.

Teachers must consent to class size numbers in grades four to seven that exceed 30 students. Teachers must also be consulted on any class in grades eight to 12 that is proposed to exceed 30 students. Teachers must also be consulted on any class that is proposed to have any more than three students with special needs in the class.

This legislation gives parents more say about class size and composition. Principals must consult with the school planning council on class organization within 15 days of the start of the school year. After the start of the school year, if a class exceeds 30 students, principals must advise the school planning council and provide a rationale for the organization of that class.

Parents, educators and school boards all have a vital role to play in school planning that is centered on increasing student achievement. These legislative changes will result in smaller classes, which in turn will lead to improved student achievement.

This comes at a time when funding for public school has increased by \$460 million since 2001. At the same time, 30,000 — this year, in fact, 37,000 — fewer students will be in our schools at the beginning of September. Since 2001 the per-pupil student grant has increased by \$991. In 2005 the province increased operating funding to B.C.'s 60 school districts by \$150 million — the single largest increase in a decade. As a result, districts have been able to hire 630 more classroom teachers, aboriginal teachers, learning assistance teachers and teacher-librarians.

Districts also received an additional \$20 million to address class size and composition as recommended by Mr. Ready and agreed to by the province and the B.C. Teachers Federation. Districts hired more than 540 teachers with that funding. In total, an additional 1,177 teachers were hired this year in B.C. public schools, helping reduce class sizes and address class composition.

Government has increased funding to school districts next year by \$20 million. Boards have been in-

structed to focus this additional funding on class size and composition. In 2006 and 2007 the average per-pupil operating grant will rise by \$114 to an estimated \$7,207 per student — the highest ever.

Today's legislation will move us several steps forward to improving student achievement, but we haven't reached our destination yet. We will continue to talk with our education partners about students' learning conditions. We will continue to monitor class organization with the new annual report on class size and composition. By working with all of our partners, we can ensure that B.C. students have the chance to reach their full potential. British Columbia, as a result, will reach its goal of being the best educated, most literate jurisdiction on the continent.

[1040]

Bill 33 makes positive and significant steps forward. We have much work yet to be done, and we are committed to an ongoing dialogue, to an increasingly positive relationship with partners across the province. We all share the same goal: the absolute best learning opportunities for our students, making sure that they have every opportunity to be successful.

J. Horgan: For the benefit of those present and for Hansard, I will be the designated speaker for Bill 33 on behalf of the official opposition. It's an honour and a privilege to respond today to the minister's comments and to speak in principle on Bill 33 at second reading.

I did listen carefully to the minister's comments, and she did articulate fairly well, I think, the history of the K-to-12 sector between October and today, with references to the establishment of the round table and the work of that body. But she didn't give us an indication of how we came to an impasse last fall.

If members will indulge me, I'll spend a portion of my remarks giving a brief history lesson on how we got to a point where professionals — educators committed to children in their classrooms, committed to public education, committed to their community — took the significant step of leaving the classroom and going to the streets in defence of public education.

In 2002, the first full year of this government's mandate, the government of British Columbia took collective agreements that were agreed to by two parties, as one would expect with a collective agreement. Negotiations over time had led to the language that teachers had come to expect and that school boards had come to interpret and that government had, until that point in time, honoured.

In 2002 the government of British Columbia stripped the language from the contracts for teachers across British Columbia, removing language that protected class size and class composition — class by class, school by school, district by district. They did so, saying at the time that it was inappropriate for collective agreements to put hardships upon administrators, to restrict their ability and their flexibility to manage the budgets that they were provided by the province and to manage the growth or lack of growth of enrolment in those districts.

I recall that at the time, the mantra was flexibility. But in the contracts, there was flexibility. There was what was called a flex factor. Class by class, school by school and district by district, educators, administrators, parents and other support workers were able to come together and find common ground. It's the usual story or justification of young people moving into a community with two or three children late in the year, and those children had to find a classroom. The addition of those children would have lifted the class size beyond the language in the collective agreement, and therefore, that provided insufficient flexibility to the administrator and to the district.

Well, it wasn't that bad. People make concessions. They make efforts to find common ground, whether it be in a collective agreement or whether it be in a classroom. It was certainly my view and the view of those on this side of the House that there was sufficient flexibility in the contracts to ensure that no students were left without an opportunity and that teachers were in a position to speak on behalf of the education outcomes in their classrooms.

Also in 2002, funding was not provided for the contract that was imposed with the stripped language. It was in the name of devolving responsibility to school boards. I would have applauded that at the time, had it come with appropriate funding to ensure that the responsibilities of that school board could be accomplished. But the funding was frozen. The contract wasn't funded.

Increases in costs as a result of hydro increases — there was a PST increase, I recall, at the time — and numerous other input costs made it difficult if not impossible for districts to manage their affairs in such a way that they could maintain the optimum learning outcomes for students. That led to a reduction in non-enrolling teachers. It led to significant reductions in teacher-librarians, counsellors, specialist teachers.

[1045]

From 2001 to 2005, as a result of the actions of this government in 2002, there was a net decline of over 19 percent of teacher-librarians across the board in British Columbia. There was a decline of 9 percent in counsellors.

I say to my colleague from Vancouver-Burrard — who has a private member's bill on the order paper with respect to safe schools, which I do support in principle — that the best way to provide safety in our schools, to provide an opportunity for students to speak about their concerns around bullying and around other issues, is to have a counsellor to talk to.

A 9-percent reduction in counsellors as a result of the actions of this government from 2002 to 2005. Specialist teachers, a 17-percent reduction. Continuing education, a 34-percent reduction. The minister and the members on that side the House will tell us that this was all in the interest of devolving responsibility to the appropriate agency, devolving that responsibility to school boards.

I'll just read a memorandum from the chair of school district 79 which was sent to me, other members

of the chamber and various other representatives in the school system — the BCSTA and others. It goes as follows:

The time has come for our school communities, led by our school boards, to insist that the Ministry of Education revisit the per-pupil funding formula, which has created underfunding in our public schools. If we cannot sustain necessary programs and provide for the needs of our students and school staff, then reason dictates that the formula is wrong. Without proper resources, the power to manage the direction of public education is greatly diminished.

That comes from one of those devolved school board chairs. The words should be ringing in the ears of every member of this Legislature. If the people that we've asked to manage and administer our school system are saying we are underfunded, then the language I hear, from the minister and other members of executive council and members on that side, that funding has never been higher, that the per-pupil funding level is as high as it has ever been....

That's all well and good, but input costs are also at the highest they've ever been. You've got to find the balance there. School boards are saying.... Districts in Vancouver, on the Island, in the north are appealing to this government to recognize that underfunding is a chronic problem and that it needs their immediate attention.

When the teachers went onto the streets last fall.... I met with many of them prior to that in their classrooms, and then during the disruption I visited them at their schools, in front of their schools. The challenge for the government at that time was one of trust. They were convinced at that time that Bill 12 — legislating teachers back to work before they had even actually left the workplace — was an appropriate public policy mechanism.

With the tabling of Bill 33 last week, I think that we've had an acknowledgment from the government that their actions in the fall and their actions in 2002 were fundamentally flawed. As we saw with the Ministry of Children and Families, policy initiatives in the early portion of this government's mandate were flawed. They were wrong. They were misguided.

There was an acknowledgment in terms of funding in the budget with respect to the MCFD issue, a little bit of weasel wording and skating on accountability and responsibility, but nonetheless, the problem has been solved to a great extent. I understand we'll have legislation later today, if we haven't had it announced in a press conference already, which will be implementing the Hughes report recommendations. That's a good thing, but it was an acknowledgment by the government that they had made a mistake.

By tabling Bill 33 and recognizing that class size is a significant determinant of education outcomes, the government has once again acknowledged that their initial policy was flawed. I commend them for that. I said to the minister privately, "That was a courageous move," and I say it here in this House. They were wrong then; they're right now.

When I said that to the minister, I did say that the devil would be in the detail. As I reviewed the legisla-

tion.... I didn't hear it in the comments of the minister today. I'll review the *Blues* later on and see if I just missed it in my haste to get into the chamber. There is a component at the front end of the bill about distributed learning, which is in essence distance learning.

[1050]

As I interpret it, at this point it is meshing the public with the private. It is meshing districts with the Internet and the world of ether out there — click-and-drag education. I think we have to look at innovative ways to reach students in the classroom, and I think the computer is certainly a vehicle for that. I'll be looking forward to the minister's comments on those sections of the bill at committee stage, and I have a number of questions and concerns about the language at the front end.

What we want to talk about today, I think — and certainly the minister did — are the components with respect to class size. The round-table partners, as the minister rightly said, are divided on solutions with respect to this.

I'd like to read an excerpt. It's an editorial from the *100 Mile House Free Press* from last week. It says: "Class Size Gets an A." That's the heading of the editorial. It goes on to say — as the minister has articulated and I will, in the body of my remarks, talk about — that the administrative mechanisms will provide, for the four-to-seven and eight-to-12, class-size language and administrative procedures.

What struck me about this editorial is the closing paragraph, hon. Speaker, and I'll read it to you and to the House. It says: "What is perhaps most important about the government bill is that it recognizes that class sizes do matter to children's education. This flies in the face of those who last fall trotted out questionable research that claimed class size doesn't matter. It certainly does, and now it is recognized."

Once again, the language that we heard in the fall: this was an insignificant issue; it was one of many. I quizzed the minister for days on this issue in budget estimates. At that time it was just one of many determinants of educational outcomes. It is one of many, but it is a fundamental issue. It is paramount. Teachers said that in the fall; parents agreed with them. That's why this legislation is in the House today.

Interjection.

J. Horgan: Now that I've slaked my thirst, I'll carry on. I thank the member for Vancouver-Kingsway for being so responsive.

As I said, the minister and I discussed this at length in estimates. At that time, of course, the round table was meeting. Discussions were underway. The minister has inventoried the participants, but I'll do it as well, because there is one omission and I'd like to talk about that briefly.

The minister said that she was at a table with the Premier and with representatives from the B.C. Teachers Federation, the School Trustees Association, the Principals and Vice-Principals Association, the Super-

intendents Association and the B.C. Confederation of Parent Advisory Councils. The group that wasn't at the table was the Canadian Union of Public Employees, an integral part of the public school system — 25,000 employees across the province. A significant partner, I would say and argue — and I did — with the minister. They were not at the table.

I think that might well be why we look at the language in this legislation and find that the class composition component is touched upon only briefly and in a restrictive manner. The language in the bill says that there shall be no more than three special needs students per classroom, provided that they are special needs students on an individual education plan, or an IEP, as it's known in the system. What that does is fail to recognize what have become known as the grey-area kids: the behavioural problems, emotional challenges and other challenges that kids bring into the classroom every morning, whether it be disruptions at home, whether it be socioeconomic — a whole range of issues.

Assessment is a key component of this as well. If you can't assess a problem, then you can't identify it. You can't provide an individual education plan. I just want to read again a note I received from an educator who, I think, speaks very capably to this issue.

It's a challenge in those districts to... If you don't have assessments, then you can't identify. With this language, districts are going to be put into a position where they're going to say: "Okay, we can only have three special needs students per classroom — three special needs students on an individual education plan."

That means that the challenge for those districts will be: "If we don't identify the problem, then we don't have to put it in the classroom." That grey-area student will just be able to slide right in and won't fall under the heading of special needs. That short-circuits the process.

[1055]

We had challenges early on in 2002-2003 when designations were narrowed. Special needs parents are very, very vocal on this issue. I know the minister is aware of that. It's a challenge for her; it's a challenge for the system. But districts will be faced with a problem without adequate funding, and the minister has said repeatedly outside of this place that there will be no new funding to implement these changes to the School Act.

Without some recognition by government that there are costs associated with these changes — costs that should be undertaken; legitimate costs that will improve education outcomes for students — then we're going to be selling our kids short. We're going to be missing the boat on the special needs component, the composition component. I know the minister will be going back to the round table in the coming weeks and months, and this will be one of the higher priorities.

I think she'll also find that the partners will be coming with their hands out anticipating funding. I was at the BCSTA annual general meeting in the minister's hometown of Prince George. We both were there enjoying the debate among trustees across the province.

There was a particular motion that was brought forward by a district, Campbell River — district 85, I believe. I might be wrong on the number, but it was a school trustee from Campbell River who brought forward an emerging motion.

The bill was tabled on the Thursday. The meeting was on the Saturday, so trustees, superintendents and others had not had an opportunity to cost the implications of these changes to the act. They're doing that now. I'm hopeful that when we get to committee stage, I'll have more details that the minister and I can discuss to try and fine-tune or hone in on some of the challenges that this legislation will bring.

There was a significant debate around this bill. There was support, as I offered when the bill was tabled and as the B.C. Teachers Federation and other partners offered, that this was a good first step. It was an acknowledgment by government that class size was a significant determinant to education outcomes. The trustees grappled with this, and they acknowledged by resolution that without adequate funding, this was hollow legislation. It was going to create more obstacles, not less. The final resolution, after many amendments, went to the floor for a unanimous vote as follows: "That BCSTA requests that when Bill 33 is enacted, government increase the funding to school districts to support the increased cost of implementation."

Now, I know the minister heard the resolution. She's reflecting upon it, but I hear in her language today that she continues to be of the view that there's adequate funding in the system to manage the challenges that are being devolved from the provincial government onto districts, from districts onto schools, and from schools onto teachers and students.

I think that the minister's going to have to reflect a little bit more. I'm hopeful that the Premier, executive council and Treasury Board will find it in their wisdom to recognize that if they want to achieve the goals they put forward in their strategic plan, if they want to achieve the goal of being the most educated and literate jurisdiction in North America, they're going to have to put their money where their mouth is.

I will not dispute that the line item in the budget annually has increased from what it was to what it is, but that misses the point, hon. Speaker. I know you agree with me, and I know others in the House agree with me, that you have got to fund to fill the problem. You don't fund to fill the budget. I hear districts talking about needs budgets — wanting to table "what I need to do a good job" budgets with the minister. I know that she'll reflect on that over the weekend and that when we get to committee stage and have a more fulsome discussion on this, she'll have some thoughts on that matter.

I believe that it's a good first start. In the downtime over the summer, while people are scrambling to find ways to implement this, perhaps we can find time for the minister to meet with trustees to hear their concerns and to hear from superintendents the challenges that the legislation brings for them in terms of implementation and timing.

We'll have a chance at committee stage, of course, to go through the various clauses in the bill, but just for a minute I'll bring up one that concerns me, and it concerns others. It's section 11. It's the body of the amendments with respect to class size and class composition. When it was announced that there was a hard cap for class sizes for grades four to seven and class sizes for eight to 12, my expectation, before a detailed read of the legislation, was that there would be no differentiation between professionals at the intermediate level and professionals at the high school level. But it appears there is. This is what has become known in the education chat rooms and certainly in my in-box, in my e-mail, as the consent-consult discrepancy.

[1100]

The bill provides for a responsibility to get the teacher's consent to go over 30 students in grades four to seven, but it only requires consultation for grades eight to 12. Now, I know that the minister's going to have a good answer to that question when we get to committee stage, but I just pose it for the public now, as we're talking about the principle of the bill, that it strikes me as odd that you would have our education system from four to 12.... The teachers are all educated. They all have the same level of education, and they all have the same accreditation and responsibilities, but for four to seven you have to consent, and for eight to 12 you have to consult.

What that means, in a nutshell, is that in order for an elementary school class to be above 30 students, the administrator has to sit down with the teacher, and they have to agree that educational outcomes will not be compromised if that number is exceeded. There has to be agreement from the teacher for that to happen. At the eight-to-12 level, however, the requirement is only to consult,

What that means is that I could say to my friend from Surrey-Newton: "Oh, by the way, hon. member, I need to consult with you about how many cups of coffee you have in a day. I'm going to say you're only allowed to have 12. We've had our consultation, and that's the end of the story." Well, that just isn't good enough. A hard cap should be a hard cap. It should be a hard cap from four to seven, and it should be a hard cap from eight to 12.

What I do like about the legislation, however, is that there is that flexibility. Certainly from the four to seven, there is that flexibility. There is the opportunity for the administration and the teacher to sit down and say: "What will be the best course of action, for the kids, that we have available to us today?" That's a positive step. As I said, I've told the minister that. What concerns me is that we're creating two classes of educators, two classes of classrooms. Consult-consent is a big challenge, and we'll be talking about that at third reading.

That's where the bill does meet the needs, I think, of students and educators and parents in the system. Certainly, the four-to-seven section is a positive one. I do worry about eight to 12. But the bill also fails students in a number of other ways.

It doesn't, as I said, address the important issue of composition. We'll be talking about that. Special needs children are being narrowly defined. The challenges in classrooms are going to increase. There will be smaller class sizes in September, but the composition of those classes will still be a challenge for educators. That's something that could have been resolved with this legislation.

We've had six months at the Learning Roundtable. We've had professionals — the best and brightest. We've had senior ministers. We've had the Premier at the table. It took us six months, and we fell short on this fundamental issue. We addressed the class size issue; we abandoned composition. That's a problem. That's a shame, and it's too bad that six months were wasted on this file.

I know that the minister's going to go back to the table. We're going to find a solution to that, but it's a shame we weren't able to do it now so that kids next year, starting in the 2006-2007 school year, could have some certainty that there would be a decent balance in the classroom so that educators could maximize the outcomes for those kids, and parents could have some comfort that when their kids go into the class in the morning, they're getting the adequate attention they need to maximize their potential.

Another challenge is that the bill doesn't cover special education classes or alternative programs. Now, I know that the objective here was to build some trust with the B.C. Teachers Federation. We're in negotiations. Everyone's conscious of that. The Ready report acknowledged that if we were going to get a resolution at the bargaining table, we had to address in some meaningful way the class size issue — and the class composition issue, I would argue. We've made that baby step, that first step, but we left a whole bunch of other stuff off the table.

One issue, going back to the eight-to-12 section, that is a genuine concern — it's a health and safety concern — is that if you have a class maximum of 30 for a chemistry lab or a shop class or a home economics lab, where you've got electrical appliances, Bunsen burners and chemicals.... If you've got an overabundance of children, one teacher is not going to be able to manage that.

[1105]

One of the suggestions I've heard, an amendment that I'm hopeful the minister will accept, is that there be an amendment to the legislation that will provide for reduced class sizes in grades eight to 12 for those classes, such as labs and shop classes. It's a safety issue. It's not just a question of best educational outcomes. It's a challenge for one individual to oversee 30 or more with only a consult component rather than a consent component to the legislation.

Another challenge — hon. Speaker, being from the lower mainland, you would appreciate this far greater than me — is that the bill doesn't speak to English-as-a-second-language education and instruction. This is a huge challenge in the lower mainland.

I was speaking with an educator from Richmond the other day. I haven't followed up on a fact check on

these, but I'll throw the numbers out. I haven't checked them, but they sounded reasonable to me, and he was an educator of some 30 years. The minister and I were at a reception with instructors who had come here to learn about the democratic process. I have no reason to doubt his data. He said that in 1988 there were 400 ESL students in the district of Richmond, in 1993 there were 4,000, and in 1998 there were 12,000. That's an enormous increase in ESL students.

My colleagues from Surrey-Newton and Surrey-Whalley are nodding their heads, as is my colleague from Delta North. It's a significant issue in the lower mainland. The minister knows that.

There's complete silence in this legislation about English-as-a-second-language instruction. I'm hopeful, again, that at third reading, when we get an opportunity to go through the detailed discussion of the legislation, we'll find an opportunity to amend the legislation so it does accurately reflect the changing face, the changing makeup of classrooms in the lower mainland and right across the province.

The government of British Columbia has a responsibility to the parents, to the children and to the educators of British Columbia to do the best they can to provide resources, to provide learning outcomes for our students that will lead to.... The challenges that we face in the future are enormous. We've acknowledged that. We acknowledge it every day.

I see the Minister of Health, and he says every day that we're doing the best we can with what we've got. We've got a fine system, but we can make it better. I know the Minister of Education recognizes that. We rejoice every day on the outcomes we see in our public system: 79-percent completion rate — the highest it's ever been. That's a positive, but we can always do better.

We can't do better if we're shortchanging those kids, if we're forcing them into classrooms that are too large with compositions that don't work and we underfund the systems so that they can't be resolved at the local level. School boards have said in convention that they need funding for this. Teachers have said to me, through my in-box and private discussions, that without funding, this legislation won't meet the needs and objectives that the government has set out for itself.

Right off the bat, we've got to address challenges of underfunding. I know that the minister has the numbers at her fingertips, and they have never been so high, and all is right and well with the world. But at the ground level, it's not happening. It's not happening. I think it's important that we stop and think about that for a minute, because it's not just a headline. It's not just the opposition. It's virtually every partner in this system.

The minister knows that, because they tell her that at the round table. They tell her that privately. They tell her that publicly, but there's not an acknowledgement by the government that without adequate funding — not the highest funding ever, but adequate funding — these implementation challenges will be so great that it will fall in on itself.

In 2002, before the government stripped class size and class composition language from contracts, it was an evolutionary process. It wasn't perfect in 1998. It wasn't perfect in 1999. It wasn't perfect in 2002, but it was evolving — the flex factor that I spoke about earlier. Governments, individuals, teachers and administrators were working with what they had to come up with the best solution. That's what we're going to do with Bill 33. It's not perfect today; it won't be perfect next year.

The minister has wisely put in a one-year review mechanism. I think that's fantastic. It's a good start. We can look at this again in 12 months and see where we can fine-tune it, where we can tweak it and where we can make it better. I think that was the long view taken by the minister and her colleagues.

I'm hopeful that a year from now we'll be able to say: "Well, it's not perfect. It's not quite what we wanted it to be, and with a few tweaks here and there, it'll be even better." In fact, I'm hopeful that we can do a bit of tweaking next week with some amendments that we've suggested here on this side and that I know my colleagues in the BCSTA and the BCTF would like also to see implemented.

I see the minister is not nodding in one way or the other. I'm not getting a response of any kind. Oh, I'm getting a smile from the Minister of Health, though.

[1110]

Deputy Speaker: Excuse me. You cannot refer....

Interjection.

J. Horgan: I'm just saying, "you're not smiling," hon. Chair.

Deputy Speaker: Do not refer....

Interjection.

J. Horgan: Thank you, hon. minister. I appreciate that. Many times you do, as well, to me — many times.

Before I conclude my remarks, I just want to read.... The day before the legislation was tabled, April 26, the government issued a press release and a document with respect to how we were doing with special needs kids. The headline on the press release says: "Report Shows Special Needs Students Improve Results."

The body of the release talks about data that's been collected and refers to 2001-2002 to 2005-2006. But what it didn't recognize is that we no longer do the assessments that we were doing at that time. We're not identifying at the same rate that we were identifying earlier. That speaks to the challenge I spoke of earlier. If districts don't have the resources to deal with the special needs kids, one solution would be not to identify them.

It's interesting. The minister is quoted at the bottom of the release as follows: "School boards are accountable to the public for the achievement of students with special needs." I think we'd all agree with that, but

those school boards need the funding and the resources from the provincial government to adequately implement that responsibility. They've said that to me. They've said that to her. They've said that to this Legislature.

I've read excerpts from letters from district chairs and also from the B.C. School Trustees Association. This is a challenge. It's important; it's fundamental. I'm hopeful that the government is receptive and open to the suggestions that I've made today and will be making in more detail next week. I know many of my colleagues wish to speak to this legislation. I'm hopeful that as the debate unfolds through the rest of the day, Bill 33 will be remembered as the bill that the government brought in to acknowledge the failure of their initial policies with respect to K-to-12 education on the class size and class composition front.

I think that's an important acknowledgment, one that we certainly recognize and appreciate on this side of the House. I know that the partners recognize and appreciate it as a good, positive first step. I think the minister has demonstrated leadership. I'm hopeful that she's prepared to go a little bit further next week with some of the changes that I'll be suggesting. Again, I want to say publicly here to those in the gallery and those in the chamber that this is a positive step for British Columbians. It's a positive step for students. Bring it on; it is.

I don't want members on the other side to think I'm insincere when I say that. This is a fundamental challenge. There was a crisis last fall. We've had six months to fix it. This goes some distance in doing that. It's restoring the trust that we all need to function in this place as legislators, as trustees, as teachers. We all need to have trust, and this is a good step in the right direction.

As I said, I am concerned about the front end of the bill with respect to the mingling of private and public systems, with respect to distributive learning. There are also elements with respect to amendments to the College of Teachers, and that wasn't mentioned by the minister. We'll be discussing that at committee stage. With that, hon. Speaker, I'll thank you for the time and give the floor to the next speaker.

M. Sather: It's my pleasure to rise and speak on second reading of Bill 33. As my colleague just mentioned, there's been an evolution that has occurred with regard to some aspects of education, leading from the very unfortunate and contentious results of Bill 12 last fall. I think we're certainly acknowledging on this side that some important progress is being made.

We do continue to have concerns, however, with regard to the implementation of this bill and with regard to some of the specifics around the bill. But we've come from a place, at least in theory and we're hoping in practice, last fall when the government and the minister were completely in denial about the issues of class size and class composition.

[1115]

We were told such things as class size is really not that significant other than in the lowest grades, in the

primary grades. Therefore, despite the struggles of the education community to bring it to light — to convince the minister that class size and composition were very important, were fundamental to better education in this province — it seemed that the minister and the government were completely intractable on those subjects.

Over the course of the winter and the process and the progress that's been made, we now have a bill where the minister has acknowledged the importance of class size and composition. We on this side acknowledge that that is indeed a step forward. Certainly, as the minister knows, we were very adamant as well, along with the education community, in working to convince the minister and this government that it is important that these subjects be addressed.

We're now at a stage of looking at a bill that will extend class-size limits, so we're going to be speaking to some of the concerns that we have, as well, about the bill. My hon. colleague has mentioned some of those, and I'd like to speak further and perhaps enlarge upon some of those issues.

Teacher collective agreements used to have provisions for special needs students, and there was a cap in the past. We're trying in many ways to return to an acknowledgment of a practicable way of running our education system, particularly with regards to special needs students.

There was also a formula for staffing and support. As my colleague mentioned, this is a crucial part of this legislation. The acknowledgment of the importance of class size and composition is very important, but it cannot happen — it will not happen — without the proper resources to back it up. So that is a piece of this bill that we will be talking to the minister about in second reading and again at a later stage.

With the support in the past, teachers had the help. It has never been easy. I know. My wife is an ex-teacher and had special needs kids in her class. On occasion I did some outdoor trips with her and could see the difficulties firsthand of having a child or more than one child with special needs. Perhaps autism was the case with some of the children that I saw. I could witness firsthand just how difficult that is for the teacher and for the assistants. The teaching assistants were absolutely essential and continue to be absolutely essential to make sure that the education system we have for our children is adequate.

G. Hogg: I seek leave to make an introduction.

Leave granted.

Introductions by Members

G. Hogg: We are joined in the gallery today by an exciting and excited group of grade five students from the school that they tell me is the very best school in the province of British Columbia — Ray Shepherd. Please make the students, parents and support people from Ray Shepherd School most welcome.

Debate Continued

M. Sather: The problem with this bill, then, is that it has no provision for support. That's going to be where the rubber hits the road here, and we will encourage this government and the minister to look at the issue of support very, very carefully.

[1120]

I wanted to talk a little bit more about special needs children and a bit about the process by which a student gets assessed with a special need. First of all, the teacher, probably in consultation with the parent or parents, is the one that is seeing firsthand the child and their needs. It may be a child who's already known to the system, and so previous teachers will pass on to the current teacher what some of the issues are. At that point the student's case is raised with the school-based team — the second step along the process to getting an assessment.

At that point the school-based team refers the case to the district resource office. That's another step along the way. Then the child is put on a wait-list. The problem with that is that the wait-list can be very lengthy. It can stretch to years. If a child comes in at grade one and there's a need for assessment that is seen, and they're not assessed until grade three or grade four, that's obviously a real loss to that student in terms of their learning opportunities. It's a real loss in terms of the teacher's ability to deliver the best education possible for that student.

Of course, one of the big barriers to getting assessment at that stage is school psychologist services. There aren't enough school psychologists available, in my understanding, and of course, there is a cost factor involved with that service. Having to wait a year or two years or three years, parents sometimes will take the private route and pay the \$1,500 to get their child assessed by a psychologist. But as we know, unfortunately, there are many, many parents and families who do not have the resources to do that.

Right away, and in this respect, we see an unfortunate two-tiering of the education system where there are those parents and those families that have the resources and are able to get the assessments and those families that don't and aren't able to get them.

Eventually the child will be identified, supposing they may be identified, as a special needs student and then qualifies for ministry funding. Up to that period, in that waiting period, they do not qualify for particular funding with regard to being a special needs student. That, obviously, is another barrier — no funding, no special service.

This funding for special needs kids is no longer targeted to the student. When I talk to learning assistance teachers in my school district, they tell me: "Well, what else can the school do, then, but take the money from that which is designated for the population of students at large?" Of course, that's an unfortunate loss of opportunity and support for those students and will understandably affect their learning outcomes and their school experience.

School boards may or may not spend all of the money the students' needs generate for services for that student. We hear a lot about this government talking about giving school boards more flexibility, more choice, but sometimes the choices, unfortunately for these school boards, are completely untenable. They are left with having to pay Peter to starve Paul, if I've got the right metaphor. I think it might be a little bit off, but you get my point.

[1125]

The fact of the matter is that they are left with very difficult choices and very unfortunate choices. It's not a real choice. That's a choice that's been forced upon them. We've gone through this in previous discussions about the lack of funding, notwithstanding what the minister says. I don't dispute, necessarily, the numbers that the minister throws out.

But as my hon. colleague said, it's what's happening at the school level. That's the reality. The fact of the matter is that in the past, school districts have had to make do because of collective agreement settlements that weren't fully funded. There have been tremendous increases in costs that they have had to face, such as increased costs for energy. A lot of choices that they have to make in these regards are not really ones that could be called free choice. They are enforced choice.

I wanted to say a bit more about the special needs students and the situation for them in the school districts that are giving the services. Schools have experienced yearly increases in their caseloads for special needs. This has come at a time when there are cuts in allotments not only for learning assistants and resource teachers but also for speech therapists, school counsellors and school psychologists. Again, it's a reference to the double-edged sword — more kids to deal with and fewer resources to assist them. So one can easily understand why the teachers say that the situation has gotten very desperate.

I know the minister oftentimes feels frustrated by that kind of feedback because of the money that has gone into the system, but we can't ignore the reality. It's the learning outcomes, the experience of the kids in the schools, and the ability of teachers under these very, very stressful circumstances to be able to deliver these services that count. Even colleagues, teachers amongst themselves, are confused about the process in terms of how these special needs students are currently being defined. The main funding categories, which I've talked to before, are things like low-incidence — meaning there aren't that many, relatively speaking — children with their particular special need. There are chronic health problems, and then there are children with autism.

Teachers say that it is completely ludicrous for them to be expected to cope with that high a number of students requiring such an intense level of support on a daily basis. There are a lot of kids who are falling through the cracks in the school system, and there's a growing level of frustration. I hope, and I'm cautiously optimistic, that this legislation is a first step towards addressing some of those real problems that we're faced with, with special needs education.

What the teachers find, unfortunately, is that only a small proportion of the caseload of the children that they are dealing with actually fall into those categories that I previously mentioned. A lot of kids fall into what is often referred to as a grey area. Teachers say that per-school funding ratios for learning assistants, resource teachers, school counsellors, speech therapists and educational psychologists are based on school enrolments and the number of identified students listed per year. To qualify for additional funding, students must undergo individual psychological assessments, and as I mentioned, an ongoing frustration is in accessing these assessments.

[1130]

If you don't get the assessment, it may be very clear to the teacher on the ground, and it may be very clear to the parent of that child, that this student needs help, that they do have a special need. But they are not identified as such and so fall through the cracks.

Teachers say another area of concern is the need that's out there. They say that even if all students that are qualified for special funding were assessed and identified tomorrow, which we know they're not, funding would still be woefully inadequate to address the needs of the vast majority of students who fall within the high-incidence category. You'll remember I mentioned that low-incidence students are funded more readily than those that are so-called high incidence, and there are more of them.

Students with severe learning disabilities, students with fetal alcohol syndrome, fetal alcohol effect, and students suffering from so-called moderate behavioral problems or unfunded syndromes such as Asperger's, which sometimes is referred to as a milder form of autism although they are two different disorders.... In my previous job as a mental health therapist, I had clients — adults with Asperger's — and got to see what a profound effect that disorder had on their lives. It's by no means a minor condition.

These students are largely ignored for funding purposes. The moneys spent on per-capita high-incidence support are hugely inadequate to serve the number of students requiring support. Funding that recognizes only enrolment numbers, but fails to acknowledge needs, leaves many students without adequate support. Often the students with the very highest potential for learning fall between the cracks because they are seen as less needy than their less-able classmates.

That's an unfortunate fallout of this problem that teachers will often talk to me and talk to each other about — that without the resources to deal with children that may be behaviorally disturbed, for example, they are unable to deliver the quality of educational service to the other children in the classroom, which professionally, personally and morally they want to be able to do.

You know, I've heard teachers say that one or two — even one — behaviorally disturbed child can be more of a difficulty than any other type of special needs student. They do need to have a psychological

assessment. They do need to have a lot of support, and that support hasn't been there.

That's one of the big problems teachers are pointing to, and we're saying that's the other half of the equation with this bill. The first part is the acknowledgment of the problem. Although it was a painful process, we feel the minister has acknowledged the problem in some respects. But then the second part is the solution. Of course, the solution is not just in designating class size and composition. You have to have the resources there to be able to do the job.

Teachers are finding this environment really stressful, really demoralizing. Obviously, that doesn't bode well for the education of our children either. You need to have students that are there prepared to learn, but you also need to have educators — the teachers — that are capable of providing the service. They're capable, certainly, in terms of their professional qualifications and their experience, but there's more to that than being able to provide the service.

Whether it's a classroom, a school or any other workplace, if the workforce is demoralized and feels they're up against a very hopeless situation, they cannot give the kind of educational service that they would like to.

[1135]

My wife, who retired a few years ago, said she feels really relieved that she was able to retire when she did, because everything that she's.... All her friends who are still teaching school.... The feedback has been very disturbing to her and to them. They aren't able to deliver the services they need to deliver, and that's a huge problem.

This government and this minister need to address that. They need to look at providing a better environment. A big part of that is providing the resources for these special needs children. While the number of educational assistants in the classroom — improving that, increasing that — would be helpful, it still falls largely, as it should, on the shoulders of teachers, especially specialist teachers, to adapt and modify programs with the IEPs.

Some of the solutions that teachers are suggesting with regard to the problem they see.... They're saying that special needs children need to be clarified for both teachers and the general public alike. So there's confusion not only amongst the educational community but also amongst the public and the parents as to who is a special needs student and who isn't. How do you become assessed? How does it become determined whether your child is or is not?

There needs to be an understanding of the true nature and large numbers of high needs students, which teachers tell us are well in excess of three per classroom. We can put a number on it and say it's going to be three per classroom, but if it's not a real number because it doesn't reflect the reality of the school population, the classroom population, then it is obviously inadequate and inaccurate.

Funding for high-incidence students, teachers are saying, should be based on true needs, not arbitrary

enrolment figures. Additional funds, they also say, need to be earmarked for psychologists to assess elementary school students. As I referred to before, the psychological assessment is one of the big stumbling blocks — one of the big barriers — in the system.

If you look again at the class-size limits, class-size limits of 28 to 30 are introduced for grades four to seven and 30 for grades eight to 12 for all students. A limit of three special needs students, defined as those with the IEPs and excluding the gifted, is established. Now, these limits can be waived by the principal and the superintendent, should they decide larger class sizes are "appropriate for student learning" and they have the consent of primary teachers or have consulted with secondary teachers.

A colleague referred to some of the concerns we have around these issues of consent and consult. Certainly, the idea of having the consent of the teacher sounds good, and maybe it will work out, but we have to see how it's going to evolve. Some of the potential problems I see for that are that it's the students who count here, but we have individual differences in terms of teachers and the circumstances they are facing in their schools.

If a principal comes to a teacher with a very forceful — I won't say aggressive — approach: "This class is impractical for us to hold to the levels that have been suggested by this legislation..." The response is going to vary, dependent in many respects on that teacher and that principal.

[1140]

[Mr. Speaker in the chair.]

It's rather arbitrary in that sense, so one teacher may consent where another teacher wouldn't under those circumstances. The children are the ones who will be affected, and consent is not as clear as it might seem. The larger educational body of teachers is not involved in this. It's on an individual basis. Therefore, we have some concerns about how that might play out on the ground, if you will.

At the secondary level, where consult is the measuring stick, that is even more indeterminate. Who is to say whether or not the minister, through the school boards and the principals, has consulted? What one person calls consultation, another one might say: "I got an e-mail telling me basically this is how it's going to be."

We definitely have some concerns around those particular issues, and we will be discussing that further. Our critic will be bringing that up, as he mentioned, with the minister during the estimates debate.

Under the class composition requirements, no teaching assistance time is committed for special need students. Teaching assistance time is crucial. Without that, the teacher becomes completely overwhelmed, overburdened by the task. Teachers should not be required, should not be asked to do a job without the tools. Part of the tools is having the teachers' assistants there to assist with the special needs kids, and there's not a commitment for that.

Gifted students are excluded from the cap. If you talk to teachers, gifted students are wonderful, but they require time because they get through stuff fast. Their demands are great, in many respects, on the educational system because they're moving at a quick rate. The teacher oftentimes has to give extra support and extra time to them.

The grey area I referred to earlier about those students that aren't fitting.... They're falling through the cracks and aren't fitting into the special needs category under the current configuration. The B.C. Teachers Federation has estimated that they are 20 percent of all students — 20 percent. So one in five students is actually in need of special assistance but isn't getting it currently. They are not assessed.

Who's going to pay for the class-size limits? Who's going to pay for the assessment? The school boards have flexibility, the minister will say, to make the necessary choices. But when you talk to the school boards themselves, they say: "Well, you know, we could pay for more psychological services, sure, but then we have to cut somewhere else. That's the reality of it."

If these are the choices that are there for them, it's a no-win kind of situation. Again, there needs to be more resources.

Interjection.

M. Sather: Well, the member says more money, and I leave that.... The solution may include more money. In fact, that's something that the government....

Mr. Speaker: Thank you, member.

M. Sather: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[1145]

S. Simpson: I'm pleased to have the opportunity to stand and speak to Bill 33. This is an important piece of legislation. It's certainly an important bill for my constituency in Vancouver-Hastings.

As the minister will probably know and certainly as others will know, I probably have more inner-city schools in my constituency than any other member in the House. There is a whole range of children in those schools who face many challenges in terms of achieving the academic accomplishments that they're looking for and ensuring that they have a great future in front of them.

One of the issues, of course, that they face in that is....

[Interruption.]

Mr. Speaker: There is a fire drill.

Hon. G. Abbott: Given the circumstances, I move adjournment of debate.

Hon. G. Abbott moved adjournment of debate.

Mr. Speaker: So ordered.

Hon. G. Abbott moved adjournment of the House.

Mr. Speaker: So ordered.
Members, please leave the building.

The House adjourned at 11:46 a.m.

PROCEEDINGS IN THE DOUGLAS FIR ROOM

Committee of Supply

ESTIMATES: MINISTRY OF FORESTS
AND RANGE AND MINISTER
RESPONSIBLE FOR HOUSING
(continued)

The House in Committee of Supply (Section A); D. Hayer in the chair.

The committee met at 10:12 a.m.

On Vote 32: ministry operations, \$473,203,000 (continued).

Hon. R. Coleman: Since we became government again in 2005, a number of things have happened in the Housing Ministry in British Columbia. All programs related to housing were consolidated into our ministry — this one. This provides a seamless continuum from homelessness to home-ownership. Our upcoming housing strategy will cover a range of options to help the homeless and those requiring affordable housing. We're building the best system of support in Canada for people with disabilities and special needs as well as children at risk and seniors. Our housing strategy is part of that commitment.

The office of housing and construction standards will have a \$210 million budget and 103 FTEs for staffing. This represents a budget increase of about \$2.5 million and a staffing increase of seven; 96 percent of the budget is transferred to B.C. Housing.

We have responsibility for 15 pieces of legislation. These range from the Building Officials' Association Act and Commercial Tenancy Act to the Shelter Aid for Elderly Renters Act and Manufactured Home Park Tenancy Act.

It's divided into three core business areas under the office of housing and construction standards. They are housing policy, building and safety policy and the residential tenancy branch.

We have a number of core business areas. On the side of housing policy, we give advice on addressing housing needs, from homelessness to home-ownership, to other ministries and within our own operation as

well. We identify opportunities where government can assist British Columbians' needs. Special attention is paid to areas of acute need, which are low-income earners with special housing and special support requirements.

Another core area of our business is building and safety policy. We provide advice on building regulations, building safety and technical building criteria, including electrical, gas and elevators. We administer the B.C. building and fire codes. We act as a secretariat on the Building Code Appeal Board, and we manage agreements under the Safety Standards Act.

We also have another business area, which is the residential tenancy branch. Approximately 36 percent of all households in British Columbia rent their property. This branch promotes positive relationships between landlords and tenants by providing information on their rights and responsibilities. We provide dispute resolution services, including arbitration.

If my voice makes it through the day, it will be interesting.

[1015]

Another key priority of ours is increased support. Since 2001 the budget for affordable housing has increased by nearly \$90 million. We've matched every federal housing dollar and spent more. That includes money dedicated to emergency shelters. More than \$202 million a year is spent on subsidized housing, more than any other B.C. government has ever spent.

Since December 2004 the Premier's homelessness task force has announced 533 housing units or shelter beds. They're located in 12 affordable housing developments in nine communities. The goal is to provide more than 4,000 affordable assisted-living apartments by 2008-2009 through B.C. Housing and the Independent Living B.C. program. To date, 1,535 units have been completed.

Since 2001 we've committed to building nearly 9,000 units of all kinds. Nearly 5,500 have been built, and we continue to work on the remaining 3,500.

One other key priority of ours way back when, and it still continues to be, is the modernization of the residential tenancy branch. I was the minister responsible when we rewrote the Residential Tenancy Act in plain language to modernize it while protecting the rights of both landlords and tenants. The act sets a cap on the amount a landlord can raise rent in a given year. The cap for 2006 is 4 percent for conventional rental agreements.

Recent amendments to the residential tenancy and manufactured home park acts provide more protection for seniors and the disabled. The modernized residential tenancy branch operations make services more efficient and responsive to people's needs.

I would imagine we're going to get an opportunity to debate the Residential Tenancy Act again this next week. With regard to that, that'll be something that we wouldn't deal with in estimates, because the legislation is before the House.

We have an enhanced electronic phone service, which means customers across the province don't need to visit an office. On average, calls are answered within six minutes, and we've been reducing those wait times. People can even access or apply for arbitration service on line. The new model is moving the branch away from paper files and phone lines to an electronic, streamlined customer service approach.

Building codes are another area of our business. The new B.C. building and fire codes will be available next year. Working with industry to make complicated B.C. building and fire codes clear, we've measured results for a more consistent application of those codes. We've made significant strides towards harmonization of building regulations, and we'll continue to do so. B.C.'s building and fire codes are based on the national building, plumbing and fire codes of Canada.

We've embarked on a modernization strategy. That modernization strategy is: we're going to adapt to the building in the future. Basically, we're seeing changes in technology. We have a skilled trades shortage and increased liability exposure. The modernization strategy is aimed to respond to that. It is based on a consultation with local governments, industry and consumers.

The strategy will explore how to achieve a number of things: more accountability from all parties in building projects; better knowledge of codes and regulations and how to apply them; more efficient, predictable regulatory processes, including permitting and building inspections. We want to create a more effective regulatory system that is better equipped to address emerging issues. In addition, through the Homeowner Protection Office, we're working with industry to design a new builder licensing requirement. We're also looking at minimum standards of education and training and the expansion of the public registry to provide consumers with the information they need to make better decisions.

In the not too distant future, we hope to be able to launch our B.C. Housing provincial housing strategy, which is directly linked to achieving one of the government's great goals for a golden decade: to build the best system of support in Canada for people with disabilities and special needs as well as seniors and children at risk.

It's a great big body of work that should be done soon, and then it has to be, obviously, funded and moved forward. I think we're on the right track, and I think we're going to get there.

It's going to focus on programs and policies that offer more housing options for low-income households. It will be designed to match levels of assistance to the degree of need. It will optimize the use of existing housing resources. It will increase the number of partnerships with the private sector and other levels of government and will promote self-sufficiency and choice, and we look forward to its success. That's sort of a quick summary of the ministry, and I look forward to the members' questions.

D. Routley: I thank the minister for this opportunity to ask questions about the ministry and thank the

staff who are present for their input to the process. I will also congratulate the staff of B.C. Housing and the other bodies that B.C. Housing is responsible for, for their ongoing and untiring effort at addressing the housing needs of British Columbians. All of us appreciate it very deeply. But we do have obvious concerns about the housing issues that British Columbians face.

[1020]

In British Columbia we have an exploding real estate market that is being driven, in large part, by record low interest rates, which is resulting in increased building starts but is not resulting in an increase in affordability for British Columbians. It's quite the opposite.

We see affordability of home-ownership for average working British Columbians becoming more and more difficult to meet. We see more and more low-income British Columbians facing the prospect of homelessness. There are approximately 56,000 households in the Vancouver area alone which are at risk of homelessness, meaning that they're paying over 30 percent of their net income in shelter or that they're in inadequate housing for the size of their family or their other needs. This is a problem that is only growing.

At the same time that we see the number of households at risk of homelessness, we see real pressure on the available rental stock for conversion to market sale. We see virtually no starts in rental housing. We see conversions of mobile home parks around the province, another affordable option to redevelopment, and this is affecting more and more British Columbians and making more and more people vulnerable to a loss of shelter.

Right around the province we see a growth in housing that, unfortunately, is not accompanied always with a growth in economic and industrial capacity or activity. The forecasted demand for future housing units in greater Vancouver to 2021 is over 311,000 units, which translates into a required annual addition of 15,570 units. Three-quarters of that future demand will be for ownership, which translates to a requirement for approximately 11,900 units per year and for approximately 3,525 rental units per year.

I hope to canvass the minister and inquire about what the minister feels the role and responsibilities of B.C. Housing are. We see the priorities of B.C. Housing being moved towards taking care of the needs of the most vulnerable and most at risk. Of course that is laudable, but we do not see an appropriate or corresponding commitment to the interests of low-income British Columbians. There are more and more people on the housing wait-list, and the housing wait-list is taking more and more time for them to work their way through.

All British Columbians face housing challenges, especially the most vulnerable. If we don't address those housing challenges in a creative and positive manner with all the partners that are available to us, using all the tools that are available to B.C. Housing, then we will continue to see growing homelessness numbers.

Right around the province we see those numbers double every year. Right around the province we see shelters with turnaways that are growing. We see representation of aboriginal people in the homeless population that is grossly disproportionate to their representation in our population overall. With less than 3 percent of the provincial population, in the Vancouver homeless count, 34 percent of the people counted were of aboriginal descent. This is an unfortunate and unjust tragedy, and it needs to be addressed by government.

We see no commitment to youth homelessness in terms of youth detox, youth beds or youth shelters. We see no movement towards culturally appropriate and acceptable shelters for aboriginal peoples. Those people who are struggling to deal with the issues of homelessness, particularly the aboriginal groups such as Lu'ma in Vancouver, struggle against all odds without proper support to address a problem that's growing out of control and beyond any of their means to cope with. I will be encouraging the minister to make a new commitment to those people.

[1025]

I hope to petition the minister for a new evaluation of homelessness numbers and for a new plan that includes targets, goals and measurable outcomes, and hope that this is a positive process and that it leads to positive results. I'll anticipate that those people can look forward to increased attention to their needs.

With that, I'll continue on with a few questions. Does the minister accept that B.C. Housing and the B.C. provincial government have a role in addressing the forecast demands that I spoke of, particularly in the urban centres?

Hon. R. Coleman: I will answer the question in a second, but I should let the member know who is sitting with me because I neglected to tell him when I started this. Yesterday when I was doing estimates with the critic for Forests, he knew my staff, but you may not know who they all are. On my right is Lori Wanamaker. She is the Associate Deputy Minister of Housing. Ken Cameron, who is the chief executive officer of the Homeowner Protection Office, is sat behind me, and Shayne Ramsay, who is the CEO of B.C. Housing, is to my left.

Obviously, hon. member, we wouldn't have a housing department and B.C. Housing if we didn't think we had a role to play. We also recognize that our role in housing is to, we think, really concentrate on the most vulnerable that the market cannot serve. That's those people who are paying excess amounts of rent, people who have multiple barriers, people who have issues with regards to access — like disabilities and that sort of thing — with regards to housing.

There are a number of places along the continuum of housing that we can address. Our intent is to have a strategy that tries to have exits and entries all along — a strategy from homelessness; to affordability; to encouraging the rental market; to helping those people who have income costs related to their shelter cost

problems; to seniors with regards to their costs and shelter aid; to adaptability of housing in the future to deal with an aging population, including our own stock; and all other aspects of housing as we go through it.

We know that we cannot conceivably produce every stick of housing in B.C. We know the challenges that our society will face going forward, particularly in our major urban centres where they are surrounded by land that isn't developable. Our municipalities have to start to understand where density will be a big factor in the future of housing. There are some that have not crossed that threshold from the single-mindedness of thinking about townhouses and three-story construction and single-family dwellings as being the only solution and haven't recognized the ability to go higher in the densities that they can produce.

In addition to that, we're seeing housing stresses even in the Kootenays and other areas across the province. We've seen a dramatic increase in housing in certain areas of the province, particularly in some resort development areas, which is another challenge for us as we go forward. Our resort strategy is actually looking at that challenge so that we can deal with issues in communities where they have resorts. Some of our resort communities are having significant challenges in having housing for employees that work in resorts and the distance that they have to travel.

All of those things are part of our package and our review in housing. Obviously, we believe we have a significant role to play, but we also know that that role has to include partnerships with federal government, municipalities, sometimes the private sector, oftentimes with individual groups like the Salvation Army, Union Gospel Mission, folks like that that will also work with us. It's a pretty complex package.

[1030]

D. Routley: I wonder if the minister could detail for me the client mix in B.C. Housing this year. These were questions that we canvassed last year, last estimates process, around the target groups — priority clients being the frail elderly, the chronically ill, the homeless and the disabled. How many total units has B.C. Housing started this year, and how many of those units will be directed towards those target groups versus those whose barrier is solely income?

Hon. R. Coleman: I'll direct the member to the '06-'07-'08-'09 service plan for B.C. Housing. On page 20 it shows that in '06-'07 the number of new unit beds created in priority areas will be 1,997, and those are targeted to four areas — assisted living, Independent Living B.C. and homeless units in that category. In addition to that, we've almost doubled now the SAFER program as the uptake continues on our increases from last fall and our increased funding on that aspect. That doesn't include other subsidy programs that we're developing and what we're doing. It doesn't include the housing strategy itself, which will be coming out later, because that funding is being worked out now.

D. Routley: In 2004-2005 the client profile of those assisted by B.C. Housing comprised approximately 43 percent low-income seniors, 28 percent low-income families and 28 percent individuals with the barriers that I previously spoke about. How have those numbers shifted? How many of the clients of B.C. Housing, currently, are low-income families?

Hon. R. Coleman: We're involved in about 84,000 units in B.C. in a variety of programs. About 17,398 of those would be families; about 45,000 would be seniors, including assisted living and independent living as well as those who would be living in subsidized housing or receiving SAFER; and on top of that, there's another 20,612 units, which are special needs.

I can give an example of those breakdowns to the member. We have co-op non-profit. We have group homes. We have partnerships, which would be.... We have public housing. We have rent supplements. We have homeless shelters. We have other co-op non-profits. We have group homes. We have devolution units, and we have devolution units, first nations. The budgets that are not tied to specific locations and the number of housing units are where we share our operational stuff with. It's a pretty big continuum.

[1035]

When the member was mentioning first nations housing a while ago, we're still working on finalizing the devolution with the federal government, because government has changed. When we get that accomplished, we're actually going to be giving the first nations probably about 2,534 units that we would put under their management, that we would actually devolve to them. They have some very good management groups that we think could do a very good job on behalf of their citizens on first nations housing.

We hope in the next number of weeks or a month or so that we'll get those things nailed down so that we'll be in a position to move.

D. Routley: The numbers quoted by the minister. If I heard him correctly, the first number of low-income families was 7,398.

Hon. R. Coleman: It's 17,000.

D. Routley: It's 17,000. This would indicate to me that there's been quite a shift in the focus of B.C. Housing away from issues of income towards issues that, I would suggest, are health-related, particularly with assisted living and Independent Living B.C. I wonder how those ratios are represented in the client wait-list at B.C. Housing.

If the minister could give me the total number of people currently on the wait-list and some kind of breakdown of those numbers — how many of those are low-income families versus seniors waiting for assistance versus the other target groups?

Hon. R. Coleman: The best statistic I can work from is applications that we have on file, which I don't think

are necessarily reflective all the time. I think it depends on what people think might be available for them for a program. But these would be people who are waiting on B.C. Housing lists for, for lack of a better description, a social housing unit — something that's actually a subsidized unit in a subsidized project — versus those that may be sitting out there paying well over 30 percent of their income and struggling financially and may not be on our list.

The lower mainland regionally has 6,557 family applicants, 2,288 senior applicants and 2,320 special needs applicants. In Victoria we have 1,001 family applicants, 347 senior applicants and 371 special needs. In the Penticton area we have 48 family applicants, and we have a higher number of senior applicants at 137 and 49 special needs. In the Prince George area we have 201 family applicants, 39 senior applicants and 39 special needs applicants. In Prince Rupert we have ten family applicants, 18 senior applicants and five special needs applicants.

The provincial total would be family applicants at 7,817; senior applicants at 2,829; special needs at 2,784.

Just to caution the member on that. To take him back to the other stats I read to him on the difference between seniors and families, the big difference there is there's a whole lot of people that are on SAFER that are actually in their own homes, so they are not on a list with us. There are 20,000 people who receive SAFER now, so they're able to stay in their rental property within the marketplace.

The total number across the board in those categories would be that.

[1040]

R. Chouhan: I have a couple of questions for the minister. We're talking about the B.C. Housing situation here. I just wanted to ask some specific questions about the Burnaby-Edmonds area. My colleague here has talked or will be talking about the future plan — how to address the shortage and all that. In Burnaby-Edmonds, the majority of people who live in one particular area are either refugees, working poor, low-income or people on welfare. The majority of the workload — work cases we have in my office — is related to the housing shortage situation.

I want to raise a couple of particular questions to bring your attention to that. One is an elderly man who lived in one of the temples there on Edmonds Street. He has now been given notice to be evicted because the building has to be renovated and all that. We sent a letter to B.C. Housing a long time ago. There were a couple units available across the street in some of the facilities owned by B.C. Housing. That is one.

There's another one I want to bring to your attention. I hand-delivered a letter to your office on Monday. It's a very desperate situation. This is a family — Mrs. Qiami came and met with me — who has four children. One is a 19-year-old daughter, and the others, I believe, are aged 17, 15 and 11. They are living in a two-bedroom unit. The situation is such that the

daughter has attempted to commit suicide twice, and as late as yesterday she tried again.

My request to the minister is to look into this situation immediately, before we have somebody die by committing suicide. It's an absolutely critical situation, and we have sent that letter to B.C. Housing, but we need your intervention on that particular case.

Perhaps I can ask a question that will be easier to answer. What steps would the minister or ministry take to address this particular situation?

Hon. R. Coleman: To the member: I guess the best way to do this is.... Frankly, neither of my staff has seen this letter. I don't know where the letter was dropped off. Was it dropped off to my office in the Legislature?

R. Chouhan: Yes.

Hon. R. Coleman: So it would have been logged. I have been in estimates debate since Monday, so I haven't been in my office. I know my paperwork is piling up.

What I would suggest that the member do is put the name on the record, if he wishes, or give us another copy of the letter through the Clerk so we can take a look at it. It hasn't ever been the case, though, that somebody would jump up a waiting list because of a question in estimates debate — because there are 15,000 or so people on the waiting list.

Of the two cases, in the first one the member mentioned that there are two vacant units across the street. I'd like to have the information on that particular couple or family. If we can get the information on the other one, we will look into it. Sometimes we even find they may not even have applied for housing with B.C. Housing. It may be a case of "What can you do for us?" where they're not even on the list.

[1045]

I would be irresponsible to comment on what I can do for someone until I have the details. If we could get the details.... The CEO of B.C. Housing is here. Normally what we would do is we would provide the information to the housing commission and ask them to look into it, and that's what we'll do.

R. Chouhan: I appreciate that, and I thank the minister for his answers. Right after this I'll take the copy back again to the minister's office so that they can look into that. Thank you.

Hon. R. Coleman: The letter has been read, and the information has been sent to my office. With regards to this application, my staff asked for an update on this one on May 2. What's today? May 4? So it's two days. They have asked for a non-profit or a cooperative unit. We don't actually house people in the co-ops or the non-profits. Those are separate application processes, so they need to make sure they've applied to the individual non-profit society's housing project, if that's the case. They are also on B.C. Housing's list.

This is actually one of the examples and challenges, where the continuum of the plan for housing is critical. In actual fact, in the marketplace, if we can move a housing strategy through that makes some sense to people, these folks would be able to find housing and apply for assistance based on income and not necessarily have to go through the process of being on a waiting list. They could actually go through a process where they would have a subsidy similar to what we do with Shelter Aid for Elderly Renters. That's one of the things we're working on in the housing strategy.

Our challenge, of course, is making sure we've got the funding long term and all of that straightened away. Of course, as the member knows, there have been two federal budgets in the last eight months or so, and two different governments. We saw a bunch of money in the budget yesterday for housing, and we think there might be some shared opportunities there. It doesn't necessarily address this one that quickly, but we will have B.C. Housing look into this for the hon. member, which is what we'll undertake to do.

At the same time, you've just actually described the problem, just so you know. There's some thought in some quarters that government should own, operate and build all rental housing. In other quarters, people say: "Well, why can't you just house them in the marketplace so they can find a decent place to live, and help subsidize them in place?" It gives them a lot bigger area that they can look at for affordability if there's a subsidy program that gives them the flexibility to move around.

We'll look into this for the member, and somebody will get back to him.

D. Routley: The minister has just referred to supplements allowing a client to have greater flexibility in where they might live, but we are seeing vacancy rates at unseen levels — very low vacancy rates. In Victoria here, we're below 0.5 percent. Where does the minister suggest people go with their supplements if there's no available rental housing?

[1050]

Hon. R. Coleman: I guess we're going to head down the discussion we had last fall.

CMHC collects the stats for vacancies in British Columbia. They only look at purpose-built units for rental. It doesn't include basement suites; it doesn't include individual condominiums that are allowed to be rented within condominium buildings in the marketplace. The numbers you have are only a portion of the rental market that may be available for someone.

We know there are people who are actually housed in the marketplace today whose only single pressure is affordability. They actually have a place that they're living, and it's not substandard. But they are paying a high rent, so the option is: can you help those people where they live today, or do you try and build 10,000 or 15,000 social housing units, at a cost of a few billion dollars, over a long period of time? There's only so much capacity to build, only so much land to build on.

The allowances have always been part of the social housing package. It was part of the package in the 1990s, when we had rent supplements as part of our toolkit, as we did with SAFER and as we did with some purpose-built stuff in social housing. That's what we do.

What we're doing now is building a strategy that is going to take those different packages and options. It's reviewing those, all of them together, as to what's the best way to integrate the entire housing strategy. That includes, in some cases, looking at partnerships with non-profits to build some purpose-built or some social housing. It includes the subsidy of some people living where they live today, because we can help them with affordability. It includes SAFER, which includes us looking at the 20-some thousand seniors units we have in the province today and whether we can adapt them a little bit so that people can age in place and stay in them longer, rather than ending up in the health care system, and so that we can allow for things like backing behind walls, bars in bathrooms, lever-handled doors and lever-handled taps.

What we're doing, I think, is being pretty visionary in trying to build this strategy, and that's why I haven't rushed it along. I want to make sure that it's solid. I want to make sure that long-term funding works for it. So we'll get there.

The member may think that government should go out and build all the social housing for all those folks. Their kids will be grown up and gone before you can build 13,000 units of housing. You just can't do it. You don't have the land. You can't zone it. You can't get the density. There's a bunch of people out there today living in decent housing that they rent, and they need some help. To try and say that the only way we're going to help them is to put them on a waiting list so that maybe if we build more social housing they might get housed, while they're already living in an unaffordable situation, is not a very good integrated use for the housing strategy.

[1055]

Our housing strategy will include all those options as part of the package: some social housing purpose-built; some special needs housing built; some other things where we'll actually leverage with organizations like the Salvation Army for additional shelter beds, because they may have some property, and they want to expand. We'll leverage with them into that.

At the same time, we're going to have a serious look, and we are having a serious look, at supplements for those people who have affordability stresses, because affordability stress is actually a stress towards homelessness. If you can take that stress off, then they can be housed where they are.

There are a number of options here and a number of ideas that we're working to put together, that we're going to launch and get done. As we do that, frankly, we're going to engage in some other discussions. One of those discussions we're going to engage in is with the federal government, because we'd like them to look at their taxation on rental properties to see if maybe

that would actually reinvigorate some investment in rental housing.

We used to build 8,000 units of rental housing a year in B.C. Now we build a thousand — you know, purpose-built rental housing. So what happened? The marketplace, frankly, got to the point where it wasn't of any.... The benefits that used to be there to build and own rental housing disappeared with taxation and capital gains and all of those things being affected.

There's a lot of work to be done on a national basis with the housing ministers across the country and provincially to set a platform, you can call it, or an environment, where we can actually manage the continuum of housing through each one of the areas that we need to have, to have the options available and to maximize the dollars we invest for the most people.

D. Routley: The minister said that he's building a strategy, and I appreciate that, but I think the people on the waiting list would prefer that he built some housing.

In fact, the minister has referred to supplements being a part of the mix, and I would agree with the minister that there needs to be a mix and a continuum approach to housing in B.C. But if I'm not mistaken, there have been no provincially supported or partnered co-op developments started in the recent past, and there have been no building starts of affordable housing or public housing directed towards low-income families.

I think the minister mischaracterizes my approach when he suggests that I would have the government build all the rental stock of B.C. or, indeed, all the housing stock necessary to accommodate the people on the waiting list. I appreciate that there needs to be a continuum and a variety of approaches, but the government has failed to build housing, has failed to partner with groups to build affordable housing for British Columbians, and that's what we need.

When we see declining vacancy rates that the minister has said are not really indicative of the market.... Well, would the minister also accept that employment rates are not indicative of the labour market because, of course, thousands upon thousands of homeless people in this province aren't on those unemployment lists? They are not registered when we record the unemployment rates, but of course we consider that they are an indication of the health of the labour market, just as vacancy rates are an indication of how many shelter spaces are available to people.

I think it would not do the minister or the issue or the people of British Columbia well to suggest that low vacancy rates do not indicate that people have significant housing challenges in finding spaces to rent. When we see these low vacancy rates, it has been shown in other markets and indeed in this market that a supplement approach in an environment of very low vacancy rates, very low availability rates, very low turnover rates — whichever way the minister would prefer to measure it — in fact raised the rent levels across the board and acted as an inflation to rent, especially for low-income folks.

Another aspect of low vacancy rates is that when we get down below 3 percent — I'm sure the minister knows and appreciates this — and once we get down to 1 percent and less than 1 percent, the spaces that are available are at the very top end of the market and at the very bottom end of the market, both of which are inappropriate for low-income families. We are indeed dealing with a huge supply problem that has been made much worse by the fact that the ministry has discontinued building new accommodation for British Columbians.

[1100]

I wonder if the minister would agree that the \$89 million so far funded by the federal government, if it had been directed towards new starts, would have built 2,500 units by now if four years ago the minister had directed that funding towards the building of new space?

Hon. R. Coleman: First of all, I'm going to caution the member not to put words in my mouth. I did not say that vacancy rates are not indicative of the market, so to even think you're going to quote me across the room that way is, frankly, somewhat ludicrous.

Let's be real here. We're going to ask questions. You're going to.... The market's indicative of everything, and certainly vacancy rates are indicative of a hot housing market, because....

Interjections.

The Chair: Through the Chair, members.

Hon. R. Coleman: Actually, I wrote it down as it was said, frankly. But anyway, the reality is this: yeah, there are low vacancies. For the member to characterize that there is only product available at the high end of the market and at the low end of the market is incorrect. There is a rental marketplace out there. It actually does serve a lot of clients in British Columbia. It can be in basement suites, it can be single-family homes, it can be rental units in condominiums, and it can be a purpose-built rental.

The bottom line is this, though, hon. member. Both markets need to be active. One of the challenges in the rental marketplace, as I said earlier, is that we're not building enough market rental units in B.C. The reasons for that are a number of things. The real estate market is pretty hot, and you can sell your product today, and a lot of people are buying units as an investment for a single rental unit. I live in a building in Victoria that has rentals in it that wouldn't be caught in even the marketplace of numbers. There are vacancies continually rolling over in that one building that I'm aware of. It's actually a pretty decent building, but they're nice enough units that a family could be housed in them.

The challenge for them is: can they get in there, and would there be a program to help them? There is no program today, except for very small rent supplement programs, as far as that group of people. On our lists,

we have different folks. We have people that have a housing stress because of affordability where they live today. We have people that are an aging population, which is going to be a bigger and bigger issue in housing as we move through the next number of years. We have a homelessness issue, a mental health issue and an addiction issue. All of those things have to be part of a continuum of housing, so we're working to make sure that we try and address that continuum as we go through it.

That does include social housing for those people that need it. In some cases, it includes a subsidy for people where they live. I don't think we should discount that as one of the options. Our strategy's going to be designed to respond to all points, as I said earlier, along that continuum of housing, starting from homelessness right through. I would like to have the ability for people that are in rental to somehow access some kind of home ownership, whether it be co-op or whether it be the ability to buy into a project over time. The only way we do that is we have to think outside a lot of boxes, and as we do that, frankly, we actually change the pipeline of housing for the availability of different types.

There are a number of very good initiatives that are being looked at to be developed. I'm sure when I get a chance to sit down — now that we know what the federal budget is — with the federal minister, I'll have a better sense of where they want to go in the partnership on social housing in Canada. When we know that, then we will design around that.

I've always been clear to the federal government as a minister, since I became the minister, that we don't want unilateral programs to exist. We would like to have bilateral programs and relationships with the government of Canada, because that way we can do some long-term planning.

There was a period of time in housing in Canada when the housing people in the east and nationally would unilaterally announce a project and put some capital into it. Then they might fund it for a year or two, and then the government of B.C. ended up, because it was a good project, picking up the funding. We would like to know if they're actually going to make a long-term commitment or whether it is a short-term "here are some dollars for capital" commitment. We'll take all the capital we can get, too, but that would allow us to buy down some costs on stuff we might build.

[1105]

You know, the next little while it's going to be very much a work in progress, and housing will always be, frankly, a work in progress. I did estimates in this House as the Housing critic starting back in 1996, and some of these ideas were on the table then. They could have helped to alleviate some stresses, and they weren't adapted then either. We had some very professional and good conversations about housing with me and the ministers of the day. I think that's where the balance comes, in these types of discussions.

[J. Nuraney in the chair.]

The challenges that face us, though, are.... We really do need to find a way to encourage the marketplace, on top of what we as government would do, to build some more rental housing. If we don't, we're just going to have this deficit that we build. When you drop from 8,000 to 1,000 in your market on an annual basis, that's not a lot of rental stock.

When you have a very good economy and you have a lot of in-migration, it puts pressure on your housing stock all across the board — including, as the member has mentioned, on the retail side. The price of a house has gone way up, and the price of a condominium or townhouse, the same, if you want to buy it.

Yet at the same time, some people will sit down and draw you a number and say: "When I built my first house at 13½-percent interest back in 1970-something, if I was actually building something today, I could build three times the house. Or I could have three times the amount of money attached to it, and I'd still be paying the same payment." It's pretty incredible.

The fact is that 95 percent of housing is in the private market today, and we need to find solutions to encourage that private rental. Part of it, frankly, is municipalities. I'd like to see municipalities.... Some of them have taken the initiative to recognize the housing stock that's actually affordable housing in their communities, called basement suites or secondary suites. I'd like to see them set some standards and start to recognize it, not to discourage it.

Actually, I did a little survey one night with a bunch of my friends. I said: "How many of you have ever lived in a basement suite?" We all had, you know, at the early stages of our lives, because it was the affordable rental that was available to us.

Those are things that we're going to package, that we're going to capture in, as we go forward. We're going to try and engage a vigorous discussion at all levels of government about options in housing so that people get live to some of these things.

As we go through that, as your member knows, one of our biggest challenges will still be homelessness and shelters. If the member has been watching, he knows.... I'm sure he's aware of the fact that every time we try and do one of them, we need really strong local leadership just to get the allowable use in place, because we get the NIMBY syndrome in and around them.

There are so many things that can be done and so many things that we think we can work on with local government, like the legalization of suites, the zoning of land to deal with how you can get your densities up and affordability driven down, what they charge in development cost charges, how long it takes to approve a project. That's very important, because in a retail marketplace, when you're carrying land, you want to make sure that you can carry the land and get your zoning. If it's going to take you two to three years to zone it, sometimes you just won't bother in that marketplace. You'll move elsewhere.

All of those things become issues as we go forward. I think the member and I are actually probably on the same page from the standpoint that we both must rec-

ognize that there needs to be a continuum in this package and that no one silver bullet is out there to solve the problem. I recognize that, and that's why we're working to try some innovation in this field, to see if we can get some innovation that will see us move forward.

There are lots of non-profits out there today, for instance, that have projects that are old, that don't have very much density on them. I know of one project, for example, on 2½ acres in a pretty good area of a city, that could probably handle 100 units on it and that today has ten. The non-profit owns it, and we'd like to encourage them to use that land with us to provide more housing stock.

That's part of what we're going to do as we go through this: work with these guys to help them learn to maximize the value of their land for the benefit of more people that they want to serve in social housing. It's going to be interesting; it'll be fun.

[1110]

I think it's important that we keep in mind, though, as we go through this, that it's like everything else. There is a client group we really want to find a way to help as soon as possible, and that client group is the people that are spending way too much income on rent today, so we can at least give them some breathing space while we address the rest of the continuum in housing.

D. Routley: Thank you to the minister, but the minister was apparently angered by the fact I referred to his reference to vacancy rates and his discounting of them as an indicator of the market. In fact, the minister's own characterization of my desire to see the government build all the rental housing in the province, I would suggest, is a bigger mischaracterization of statement.

In any case, the minister has talked about the local government role. From my experience travelling around the province, local governments are mystified about the minister's approach to housing and would like to be consulted. They do stand ready to be partners in adapting bylaws and adapting restrictions on secondary suites, and whatnot. Several jurisdictions obviously already have, but those that have are now waiting for the minister to take the leadership role in working with those that haven't in order to bring a balance to the playing field and bring some continuity.

The minister has referred to the important role of local government in terms of land use, development charges, accepting secondary suites and basement suites — this sort of thing. Will the minister now commit to a consultative process to travel the province and consult with local governments in a structured way, report on that consultation and have his new housing plan reflect the views that he might collect in such a consultation process?

Hon. R. Coleman: The time for consultation is actually over. The time for action is here, in my opinion. That's why the housing strategy. To be fair to the

member, I've been on the housing file in one way or another with an interest for at least ten years as a person in public office. I've attended UBCM seminars, and I've attended housing seminars put on by CMHC and other organizations across the province over the years. Since I've become the minister, I've met with a whole number of municipalities, and not one of them has told me they're mystified. A lot of them have said: "Would you please get some innovation for us? Can you give us some advice?"

What we did is we started.... Back at UBCM we met with seven resort communities who we participated with, and they were: Invermere, Revelstoke, Fernie, Whistler, Squamish, Tofino and Ucluelet. We're partnering with the Ministry of Energy and Mines, and B.C. Housing did a study to support local solutions to housing issues in northeast British Columbia. We facilitated a meeting of resort communities to discuss current housing challenges. We partnered with the Ministry of Community Services and the Ministry of Tourism to help address resort community housing issues. We've studied eight communities — Fort Nelson, Fort St. John, Taylor, Dawson Creek, Chetwynd, Tumbler Ridge, Hudson Hope and Pouce Coupe — gathering housing data and facilitating housing forums to understand current housing dynamics and identify local solutions.

I have met individually, through the interior of British Columbia, with councillors from a number of communities — from Peachland right through to the Kootenays — with regards to their situations and some things that we think are opportunities for them to do to be innovative.

One of the challenges in smaller communities.... Smaller communities actually have some opportunity to do some more innovative things than large, because some of these communities have land. The biggest thing you can do for them is show them how to do a public proposal call to find somebody to attract to enter into a partnership on their land with them and have innovative solutions to it.

[1115]

An innovative solution can be anything from a share equity-type arrangement, where a municipality puts up land and a non-profit group builds a building.... Part of the building is sold to the marketplace, and the value gleaned of that is used to pay down some rental units in the project that are then allowed to be operated by the non-profit for affordable rental within the building and within the community. There are some successful projects where that's been done and where 15 percent of every piece of profit in the future coming off the resale unit goes into a sinking fund for housing in the community.

All of those options are there. I think smaller communities.... We recognized back at UBCM that they need some help just in designing the proposal call and seeing if somebody is interested in working with them. They have the one asset that is the biggest part of starting with a housing project, and that's: where would you put it? If they have land and they're prepared to

have their own land involved, you find that the zoning process is streamlined and all the rest of it.

There has been lots and lots and lots of consultation on housing, and we're starting another process next month with, I think, mid-size communities — is it mid-size communities? — with more communities on the whole.

Homeless strategy. Going into UBCM this fall, we'll run another symposium on that. It's education. It's training. It's giving tools to folks and the ability to do things, and we're doing that. We've been doing that with communities. What I hear from most communities is that they're looking forward to this strategy, because they'll have something they can point to and see that there is some innovation in it. They can work with us to try and find long-term solutions in housing in their communities.

D. Routley: I would suggest to the minister that the time for action has long passed and that the decision by his government to cancel 1,700 units that were due to be constructed when they first took office was an indication that they weren't prepared to take the action that was necessary. As a result, we ended up in a position where we have a very low vacancy rate, very few new social housing units available. We are being asked to accept that the solution to this is a supplement program — giving people a supplement to their income in order to make it to a market rental.

Indeed, I would suggest to the minister that we need housing units. The government should be partnering with the non-profits, the co-ops and the private sector to build new units now, and that is long overdue. We are scrambling to pick up the pieces of that. The cancellation of housing projects at the beginning of the first term of the government was a mistake, and we need now to see reinvestment in that process.

I find it difficult to accept that a shelter is a housing project. I think that a shelter is something offered to cope with the failure of a housing policy and a failure of the housing strategy to deliver affordable housing for people, and that we are not spending money wisely. We should be directing our investment towards housing for low-income British Columbians.

Hon. R. Coleman: One of the examples of one of those projects that got cancelled was Woodward's, which at the time had a hundred affordable housing units and now has 200 affordable housing units in the new design of the project by us. A lot of those projects actually ended up getting done in different types of densities and stuff.

The member and I will agree and disagree on certain aspects of housing. I believe a continuum has to be there. I believe it's time that we in public office started to recognize that everything we do doesn't have to be driven by cutting a ribbon somewhere on something that we can physically stand in front of and say, "We built 50 units of housing," when the same cost and the same investment could have helped 200 people. I think it's important to recognize that in the package of housing you need to have that continuum.

[1120]

If you went out and built the entire waiting list of B.C. Housing today for just the capital cost — the average cost that we find is around \$200,000 a unit at minimum, and today's construction is higher — it would be \$2.6 billion, compared to.... If you took \$40 million a year, you could actually subsidize 15,000 families in the marketplace.

Where do you decide what to do with your capital plan, amortization, mortgaging and costs versus what you can do to help people? I believe there has to be a balance there. I believe that's where we're going to drive to, to make sure there is a balance. We're going to work with the B.C. Non-Profit Housing Association and the co-op association, who I've met with, and the other groups to find increasing options and opportunities within their portfolios. At the same time, we're going to look at other opportunities. I think it's critical that we do that.

I just know the difference that taking the pressure off somebody financially can make to the whole socio-economic makeup of a family. If the pressure of not having to pay 50 cents of every dollar every month out in rent can be lowered for someone, that means somebody has options with what they can do with regards to nutrition, medical care, clothing, education aspects and stuff, because the money is now there for the family. I think that's critical.

I believe it's important that we have a package and a continuum of housing, simply because I want to see us maximize the benefits for all British Columbians by having a strategy that isn't stuck in one pigeonhole or another as we try and move forward.

D. Routley: Recent statements from the minister would indicate more focus being put on rent supplements. The minister has indicated that they're a quick way to address housing needs, and I would agree with him there. It is a quick way to address housing needs, but in the end, in the long term it is not a cost-effective way of addressing housing needs.

Just reading from a report prepared by Michael Shapcott for the Centre for Urban and Community Studies, University of Toronto, he compares the projected costs of private sector rent supplements with the projected costs of new co-op and non-profit housing. Over a 30-year period the cost of 500 rent supplements in Ontario generally was \$201 million — in Toronto, \$248 million — compared to the projected costs of new co-op and non-profit housing at \$176 million and \$172 million over the same period of time. That doesn't even take into account the fact that when we build co-op and non-profit housing, we actually build a public asset that continues to benefit the citizens over a multi-generational period, whereas supplements are gone once they've been spent, and no continuing asset is built.

Would the minister agree that the approach of using private sector rent supplements versus subsidized co-op or non-profit housing over the long term is a more expensive approach?

Hon. R. Coleman: For every report supporting new-build, there's another that says rent supps are okay. That's a debate. Frankly, when academia looks at housing from a clinical standpoint.... Interestingly, I can make the numbers work either way. If I sat down with a pen and pencil and wanted to do a pro forma, I could show you a pro forma that would work either way.

It's fine for people to think we can just go out and build it all and own it all. Now show me where the land is, where the rezoning is, where the neighbourhoods that will accept it are. Show me whether there is any value to integrating people within communities rather than putting them, in some cases, in a stigmatized setting where they're all from the same socio-economic group.

[1125]

Try and measure the value of a healthy family against the costs of saying that we built that building and we own it versus helping a family. Also, remember that if you are able to have flex in your system so you do both, which is our intent.... To have both of those on the table and do both is, frankly, better.

You know, you can change lives. I don't think you can measure changed lives on a pro forma sheet. I just don't think you can do it. I just think that if I had the ability tomorrow, if I could find the funds and build a plan that could happen to supplement about 5,000 or 10,000 people today, as we try and build the strategy.... If I could do that, that would be my first priority. If I could take pressure off 5,000 or 10,000 families tomorrow, I'd be happy to do it. I know, though, I can't take it off them by just having them sitting on a waiting list for the next two, three or four years.

I think there has to be a package that says that some of it we're going to build with non-profits as our partners, and we're going to have some of that housing; with some we're going to have rent supplements in the marketplace; some we're going to adapt on stuff that we have already so people can age in place; some of it is going to be new ideas on assisted living and how we manage that.

I am very passionate about the whole package of housing in our structure and our community. I believe that we have to address everything from the affordability of building it on the bureaucratic side and on the Building Code side and all of those aspects as to how we streamline, modernize and have at least some stable, continuous direction in that area that helps us to address those costs. I believe we have to address densities in some communities. They have to wake up and understand that density can be affordability. I think they need to understand that.

I think that as we go through it, we need to be able to look at our housing strategy going forward and say that we're not stuck on one idea. We're not going to be stuck on one idea. Social housing, non-profit, investment in capital with non-profits — we're going to do some of that. Are we going to do some rent supplements? You bet we are. If we can help some families, I won't apologize for that.

In September we invested \$16.6 million a year to increase benefits to 12,000 seniors and 7,200 more that can still be housed that are getting subsidy — \$16.6 million. That is an 80-unit townhouse project, if you're lucky, on the lower mainland, at a capital cost. I don't believe we could actually build a townhouse on the lower mainland for \$200,000, including land, DCCs and construction costs. The one capital cost for 80 people versus the money being invested annually in 7,000 people, and giving them a quality of life..... If I go and build 80 units a year for the next five years, I get 400 units. There are 7,700 people today that are being helped through SAFER, in addition to the 12,000 that were already being helped who got a raise last fall for the first time — shamefully, in history — in 15 years.

I think what we did last fall for seniors was the right thing to do. I meet with seniors organizations, and they're just tickled pink that somebody finally listened to the fact that SAFER was a good thing, and they want to see it grow and expand.

I think that there is no single solution to housing. We actually have to be a group of people — governments, opposition, communities — understanding the different strategies have to blend. As I say, some is built by government, and some of it is built in cooperation with non-profits. I think in our non-profit sector are very good operators and managers of social housing for the most part. Government should be in the business of making sure that the strategy has a broad base so that it can build a good future for housing in British Columbia.

[1130]

D. Routley: The minister has said that if he could, he would. The minister has said if he could go out and help that many families tomorrow, he would. I would suggest he could have, had the government made a stronger investment in creating new units over the past five years. In fact, the federal investment and funding that we've received — \$89 million to this date — would have built 2,500 units.

The minister refers to a stigmatization. In fact, the progressive social and affordable housing developments in this province do not stigmatize. They blend neighbourhoods; they're an excellent tool of urban planning. They allow us to have some control over the blending of neighbourhoods — a healthy blend — and would indeed result in an increase in the health in families.

The lack of the government's commitment to building new units has, in fact, caused people of low income to cluster in the only areas that they can afford. If there is any concentration of social issues, it is being caused by that and by the government's lack of planning in creating new units and in helping our neighbourhoods to be of a healthy blend.

The minister says that he believes that ideas shouldn't be stopped or stuck in one place. I assume he is indicating that I have suggested that. In fact, I have agreed that supplements are a good tool in certain circumstances. SAFER is a good example of that, but supplements will not solve the problems of affordability

for low-income families. Supplements will not address the needs of the tens of thousands of people on the wait-list, because there's nowhere for them to take their supplement to apply it. There are no units.

To give supplements to the people on the wait-list — if that is going to be the preferred choice of government — I would suggest, will be inflationary and will not address the needs of the people that they're attempting to address. So will the minister commit, in the new housing plan, to building more units in partnership with the non-profits and co-ops of this province? If he will make that commitment, how many units will be built?

Hon. R. Coleman: First of all, it's my housing strategy, the government of B.C.'s housing strategy, and not your housing strategy. So you're not going to dictate what's in it, because you're in opposition; we're in government.

The reality is that the housing strategy is going to get rolled out. To be able to get it to roll out, it has a process it goes through: committee, cabinet, Treasury Board — how you're going to apply your dollars and all that. So I'm not going to stand up and tell you today what's in it, since it's still in a pretty.... It's still within what I guess we'd call a confidential process.

But I can't let the member say we haven't done anything on housing in the last five years, so I'm going to give him some numbers. We have completed 3,234 units under the provincial partnership, the provincial housing program, which is the creation of new non-profit and cooperative units development so that people can have safe, secure, affordable housing for families and individuals. We have 143 additional, on top of that, under construction.

Under the new builder conversion under Independent Living B.C., which is basically a housing-for-health partnership designed to meet the needs of seniors and people with disabilities, we have built 1,118 units, and we have another 2,259 units under construction, for a total of 3,377.

Under the community partnership initiative, B.C. Housing supports our housing partners in creating an innovative strategy through one-time grants, access to consulting services and provision of construction and long-term financing. We've done another, on top of that, 767 units finished and 807 units under construction, for a total of 1,574 units.

We've done 1,378 rent supplements, where we're in a rent supplement relationship. We've upgraded, in partnership with our partners, 700 units for better access for seniors. We actually upgrade them so they can age in place with what I talked about — lever-handled doors, bars in the washrooms so they can get in and out of the tub easier, and that sort of thing. In addition to that, in the provincial homeless strategy we have 533 units allocated to date.

[1135]

We have been building, we have been investing and we have been doing that. While we're doing that, as you can see, we have a variety of continuums even

within what we're doing today. What we want to do is just go a little further to expand on some of those initiatives and find the creativity within communities to build on top of what we are already doing.

I think, frankly, that we're having the same conversation. I think we agree that there has to be a continuum and package. I think we agree that there have to be options, that there is a place for government in some projects and not in some projects. There's a place for a relationship with non-profits, a place for a relationship with communities, a place for a relationship with the private sector as well.

That's what we're doing. That is what we're walking through over the next number of weeks to get to our final strategy, which, once we get it through our processes, we will announce. I think people will actually like it a lot when we're there.

D. Routley: I'll thank the minister for the lecture and the reminder that I'm in opposition. Sometimes it is actually quite confusing, because when we ask questions in this House, often we're pointed across at, and you say: "Well, that government in the '90s...." Unfortunately, Mr. Speaker, like you, I'm fairly new here, and I wasn't around at that time. So it is nice to be reminded of exactly where we stand — isn't it? — and I appreciate that.

Also, I don't think that in any place or at any moment did I claim ownership of the B.C. housing plan, and I certainly wouldn't try to do that. But the minister's wrong. It's not his housing plan; it's B.C.'s housing plan. The minister's wrong. It is not me who he is speaking to; he is speaking to those who voted for me. He is speaking to the tens of thousands of British Columbians, the hundreds of thousands of British Columbians who voted for a different approach. When he is dismissive of me, it is not insulting to me, because in fact, I believe he is being dismissive of hundreds of thousands of British Columbians.

Of the units that the minister quoted to me, how many of those units are directed towards health-related housing, assisted living and independent living, and how many of those units will be available to families whose barrier to housing is a low income?

Hon. R. Coleman: There are pages and pages of them, so what we'll do is undertake to get the member that information.

To the member: I'm not dismissive. I recognize that the government's housing strategy is for all British Columbians. That's why we've worked with UBCM. That's why we've worked with communities and non-profits as we've brought it forward. That's why we've had some fairly extensive discussions internally to government, and that's why we have to go through and see how we can do it within a fiscal plan. I'm not dismissive at all.

I believe, though, as earlier when the member sort of mentioned, "Would you go out for a consultative process?" that it is time for the plan to come forward. I believe it is time for us to send the message about what

we're going to do going forward, on top of what we already do in housing in B.C. I believe that's pretty critical to having some success in lowering some of the pressures on families and individuals.

I particularly want to make sure that as we come through it, we focus on those that are the hardest to house: those with mental illness and multiple barriers, those folks that can't usually find housing in the regular marketplace of housing. I want those folks to have the services they need. So this housing strategy actually has to have a coordinated approach between us, Children and Families, employment and investment and also along with Health, because frankly, those things are needed to be able to find creative solutions to some of the challenges that face us.

[1140]

I'm not at all dismissive of the member opposite. I think the member opposite has a similar passion, and that similar passion is shown. As part of a constructive discussion, we talk about it. But, as we come through it, I think what we'll find, looking at it five years from now, is that we'll say: "That wasn't that bad of a strategy. It actually helped a lot of people." And that's the whole goal: helping people, not anything else but. The goal is to help people. The more people we can help, the more lives that we can better, then the better job we've done.

As long as we always keep the focus on the person, the family and the people when we're trying to build a strategy like this, we'll be successful. The minute we change our priorities away from recognizing who we're trying to help or what we're trying to accomplish, we'll lose.

I think housing, historically.... The member will recognize that I haven't actually brought up the record of the previous government in any of my discussions on this file, nor have I, actually, in my other portfolio in my other debates either, because we're now the government. We have responsibility for our budgets and our plans, and that's what I believe we should answer to. So I'm not spending a bunch of time going back and having revisionist history, because there are all kinds of things that happened in different times and jurisdictions that have had an impact on housing in B.C. — I mean, simple things, like some of the issues in and around the Building Code, how it was managed and how communities changed certain things about FSR in footings that had an impact on some leaky condos, for instance.

There's no sense in going back. You have to find the solutions going forward. You have to build on something that people can believe in. I believe that we're going to be bringing a clear message forward that on top of what we already do in housing in B.C., on top of all the partnerships we have, we're going to grow those partnerships with non-profits and groups. Then we're going to add some things, and when we add some things, I think it's going to be good for everybody. That's where we're going.

I'm comfortable with that. You know, it will be British Columbia's housing strategy. It will be the government that brings it forward. It will obviously be open

for discussion and advice and criticism from opposition members, as well as from the public. But at the end of the day, I think if we keep our focus on helping the most vulnerable, helping those with multiple barriers and with mental health and addictions as part of our package, concentrating some services into existing housing stock to help them and actually creating some new housing stock for those folks.... If we can take that group and help them and, at the same time, help the people that have housing stresses because of affordability — and if we can get as much of that to as many people as we can — then I think we'll have some success.

Are we going to solve it all at once? As the member knows, it is just not that simple. We know that the issues in homelessness and mental health and addictions are not just British Columbia-wide; they're actually nation- and North America-wide and, in many cases, worldwide. We're going to try and work with our other partners — federal, provincial, etc., as I said — and we're going to try and get to some solutions here.

C. Evans: In the interest of brevity, I'm going to try and make my questions into one question as fast as possible, because I expect we may be interrupted here.

Historically in British Columbia, the B.C. Buildings Corp. used to be able to sell land to community groups or to municipalities for a diminished price if good works were going to happen. That time has ended in B.C.; the B.C. Buildings Corp. and also B.C. Lands are now required to meet a market requirement when they dispose of land. That's all fine. I don't have any objection, and I understand the estimates for that event.

However, during that time, the Kiwanis, a non-profit volunteer group in the city of Nelson, built four wonderful housing projects that allow seniors, folks with disabilities and low-income people in my constituency to live well, and all were built during the era when land was made available at an often non-market rate for good works. Now Kiwanis desires to build a fifth project on land owned by B.C. Buildings right next door to land which they manage and that B.C. Housing assists with. There is some contradiction, because what we used to be able to do to create housing — not the government but non-profit groups — is made somewhat difficult by this market requirement.

[1145]

I am not asking the minister to solve it or even to understand the problem. What I would like, since I have difficulty dealing with B.C. Buildings straight up by themselves, is if the minister would commit to sending an employee of B.C. Housing to sit with the Kiwanis and me and B.C. Buildings and attempt to negotiate a land price for a fifth project that is within the envelope of what can be afforded for non-profit housing.

[Interruption.]

Hon. R. Coleman: I work fast, and I've got to give you this answer.

The Chair: If I may interrupt, I think that is a fire alarm. I would suggest that we all vacate the building in the process that is required.

We will rise and report progress.

The committee rose at 11:46 a.m.

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