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THE HONOURABLE BILL BARISOFF, SPEAKER

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

SECOND SESSION, 38TH PARLIAMENT

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Honourable Bill Barisoff

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TUESDAY, MAY 16, 2006

The House met at 2:04 p.m.

Introductions by Members

Hon. G. Abbott: We have the pleasure today of welcoming representatives from the Multiple Sclerosis Society to the House. In particular, we look forward to welcoming Kathy Croucher, Todd Abercrombie and Chris Fortune to the Legislature.

They've provided all members of the House with a red carnation. The red carnation is a symbol of hope in the search for a cure for multiple sclerosis. They're also here to recognize that recently May was proclaimed as Multiple Sclerosis Awareness Month in British Columbia.

I ask that the House please make these guests welcome and applaud the wonderful work they do in raising awareness of MS and in searching for a cure.

[1405]

M. Farnworth: Well, there are a number of great schools in my riding, hon. Speaker. It's my pleasure to introduce a group of grade 11 students from the B.C. Christian Academy accompanied by their teacher Mr. Wiens. They are here today to learn about how this chamber functions. Would the House please make them most welcome.

M. Polak: Today in the precincts, visiting from my riding of Langley, are students in a grade five class from Belmont Elementary School. Along with them are two very good friends of mine, Cindy and Tanaya Hof. Would the House please make them welcome.

D. Chudnovsky: Today in the gallery visiting us from Toronto are my parents. Pearl and Hy Chud are here today. Everything I ever needed to know about politics and social justice, I learned from them. Please help me in making them welcome.

J. Rustad: It's a great pleasure today to introduce someone who comes to us from Ontario, who was sworn in yesterday as our new Ombudsman for British Columbia — Kim Carter. She comes with excellent references, and I look forward to the work that she will be doing for us in this province.

D. Routley: One of the fine schools in my riding is Lake Cowichan Secondary in the beautiful town of Lake Cowichan where, of course, it never rains. They are visiting us with a group of students from Trois-Rivières, Quebec, and their coordinators are with them as well. The coordinator from Trois-Rivières is Isobel Guy. She has brought 23 students with her. The coordinating teacher from Lake Cowichan is Vanessa MacDowell, with 21 students. They've come to see how politics works inside the House, and outside they got to see that the best politics works from the ground up into this chamber.

Hon. K. Falcon: In the precinct today we are joined by 26 grade five students from Cloverdale Catholic elementary school. They are joined by their teacher Ms. Brady, along with five parents who are accompanying them. I would ask the House to please help me make them welcome today.

R. Fleming: In the gallery with us today is a constituent of mine. It's Dr. Larry Hannant, who's an adjunct professor of history at the University of Victoria and a contributor to the *Great Unsolved Mysteries in Canadian History* website. Would the House please make Dr. Hannant feel welcome.

C. Trevena: We've had lots of introductions of school parties, but school parties would be nowhere without their teachers. I hope the House will make welcome one of the guests in the gallery, a constituent of mine and a retired teacher. Julia Davies taught for 28 years in Gold River. I hope the House will make her very welcome.

Hon. C. Richmond: A young gentleman from Fort McMurray is visiting us today — Blake Robert. Blake has participated in the youth model parliament in B.C. for the past few years, and he will be attending University Canada West this fall. Would the House please make him most welcome.

S. Fraser: There are a number of residents from my constituency here today, who are concerned about child care issues. Would you help me welcome four of my constituents: Margaret McGarry and Nikky Bezanson from the Hummingbird Child Care Centre and Alannah Miller and Marion Pickton from North Island College. Please help me make them feel welcome.

D. Chudnovsky: My colleague the member for Mount Pleasant and my leader insist that I introduce to you once again a woman who I have introduced to you before. You'll know her as the finest political organizer in the known universe. Ruth Herman, my partner, is in the gallery again today.

[1410]

Introduction and First Reading of Bills

UTILITIES COMMISSION AMENDMENT ACT, 2006

G. Gentner presented a bill intituled Utilities Commission Amendment Act, 2006.

G. Gentner: I move the bill be read a first time today.

Motion approved.

G. Gentner: I'm pleased to introduce the Utilities Commission Amendment Act, 2006, before the House today. This bill stipulates that proposed high-voltage

transmission lines located within the vicinity of settled areas, parks, recreational areas, residential areas, private and public schools, child day facilities and playgrounds will come under immense scrutiny under provincial law. The bill mandates the Utilities Commission to weigh adverse effects, including electromagnetic fields and all policies concerning public health and safety.

The mandate of the B.C. Utilities Commission must move forward and reflect the 21st century with a strengthened triple-bottom-line approach. This bill spells out new stringent siting criteria for overhead electrical transmission lines with a capacity of 345 kilovolts within a residential neighbourhood.

We must recognize the threat of EMF to public health. For example, the following family in Delta has been severely impacted. Four out of five family members who live in a home along a right-of-way have been diagnosed with cancer. One brother at 30 with bowel cancer. His sister diagnosed with ovarian cancer. The father, prostate. The step-mom died of lung cancer. A neighbour on one side has stomach cancer, and the other two neighbours both have died of cancer.

In many jurisdictions, legislation has tightened up EMF regs. The bill directs the Utilities Commission to consider keeping high-voltage transmission lines away from residential areas and states that any proposal to increase the voltage of transmission facilities within residential areas would automatically trigger a review to see if a viable alternative can be found.

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

Bill M208, Utilities Commission Amendment Act, 2006, introduced, read a first time and ordered to be placed on orders of the day for second reading at the next sitting of the House after today.

Statements (Standing Order 25b)

CHILD CARE SYSTEM

D. Thorne: May is Child Care Month, the month during which we draw attention to the important and valuable work undertaken by early childhood educators. Their contribution to society and to our children is immeasurable. For this, I thank them.

Quality child care is important not just for children, who actually need early childhood education to develop in a healthy way, but it's also important for parents because it allows them to work without fear for the safety of their child. Recent statistics show the true costs of child care to be about \$54,000 from birth to age 18.

This reality has finally forced a public discussion about child care in a country and indeed a province that has not, according to the OECD, developed a coherent long-term vision for early learning and child care. This lack of a plan in British Columbia for child care further highlights the OECD's criticisms, which

are most strongly felt by parents of the children we are discussing and early childhood educators, who operate within a disparate and under-resourced patchwork of services.

Quality within the child care system hinges on trained staff, livable wages, and affordable and accessible child care spaces. Early childhood educators in this province are the key to the development of a quality system, working alongside the provincial government that is openly and aggressively committed to this worthwhile goal. It is clear that the federal government has wiped its hands of a universal system of child care. This is a monumental loss to all of us and to all Canadians. We must all take action. We need to invest in our children today.

PROVINCIAL SALES TAX REVIEW

R. Sultan: I rise today to talk about the provincial sales tax. Last June this government, under the leadership of our Premier, committed to a comprehensive review of British Columbia's PST. The Minister of Small Business and Revenue was asked to go across the province to meet British Columbians and to listen. The Premier asked the minister to receive this advice and use it to design a PST which was simpler, more streamlined and more fair.

[1415]

From November through April the minister chaired consultation sessions in 20 communities from Abbotsford to Williams Lake. I played a support role in about a third of those meetings. Many businesspersons told us they hope PST administration could be made less challenging. For example, the government expects retail clerks to remember that paint used for fishing boats is tax-exempt, while paint used for whale-watching boats is not. On and on it goes.

Progress is already being achieved. For example, the B.C. Agriculture Council is working on streamlined PST rules with the minister, for agriculture. Meanwhile, hundreds of submissions have been received. As an observer, I've been impressed by the degree of public interest and by the commitment and zeal of ministry staff.

There is still time for the public to submit their advice, but the deadline is only three days away. E-mail the minister your advice at www.sbr.gov.bc.ca/pstreview or by fax or post. British Columbians should not miss this golden opportunity to further improve the tax environment for B.C.'s thriving commercial sector.

ARNE KNUDSEN

G. Gentner: On May 29, Delta is recognizing Arne Knudsen. Arne arrived in Delta in 1929, and like thousands, he rode the rails. However, in this remarkable story, by 1936 he was on the podium staring down Hitler as the recipient of the Olympic bronze medal for swimming.

Arne knew what fascism was, and a year later he was fighting Franco. During the Second World War he

became one of Canada's expert anti-tank gunners. On July 10, 1943, Sergeant Knudsen led the first Canadian division to Sicily. In Italy he became a prisoner of the Nazis, but before escaping, he promised the prison commander that he would visit his family in Saskatchewan. The commander died in an Allied bombing raid, but Arne fulfilled his word and did pay a visit to a little town in Saskatchewan.

At Savio he took shrapnel in the leg and, later, a bullet through his shoulder. Arne is one of the most decorated soldiers of British Columbia. His most cherished award is the Bronze Star he received at the White House from President Truman for his courageous bravery in saving members of the Tennessee Rangers on January 11, 1944.

After the war, Arne settled in North Delta and became a chicken farmer and an operating engineer. By 1946 Arne started the North Delta Ratepayers Association and became captain of the volunteer fire department by purchasing a 1926 Studebaker fire truck.

On May 6, Arne Knudsen celebrated his 96th birthday. He is the stuff that builds communities, and he is the second person ever to receive the Freedom of the Municipality Award, Delta. In my community, Arne is an icon, and I ask this assembly to please recognize somebody who has truly made a difference.

VOLUNTEERS IN BURNABY AND COQUITLAM

H. Bloy: It is well known that volunteers are integral to building and maintaining strong communities. Through their hard work and commitment, volunteers and community service organizations provide an invaluable service to communities across British Columbia. The result is significant cultural, economic, social and educational benefit for our communities.

One in three people living in the cities of Burnaby and Coquitlam volunteers for various organizations. That's 145,000 people in all who provide assistance to these organizations to make the region a better place to live.

It has been my pleasure to deliver grants to many of these groups in my riding of Burquitlam. SHARE Family and Community Services Society is one such recipient, led by Joanne Granek. This non-profit agency provides leadership and programs to people of all ages to strengthen families and communities.

Another recipient is the Stoney Creek streamkeepers association, led by Jennifer Atchinson and her many volunteers. Their efforts in preserving and maintaining the salmon spawning creek and watershed will make sure the creek will be there for future generations to enjoy.

There are so many groups that I could name: B.C. Adoption; Burnaby Mountain Biking Association, led by Ron Burton; Variety, the children's charity; Scouts; Guides; Lions; the Rotary Club; Kinsmen; Burnaby Family Life; sports groups; and the cultural and arts. These groups and their hard-working volunteers are making a real difference, and I am proud that we are able to support their work. I want to thank all the vol-

unteers who make British Columbia the best place on earth to live.

[1420]

RIDGE MEADOWS WOMEN'S CENTRE

M. Sather: This afternoon I am pleased to speak about the excellent work being done by the Ridge Meadows Women's Centre in Pitt Meadows. The centre has been providing poverty relief and support to Maple Ridge and Pitt Meadows residents for over ten years. Some of the programs that the centre provides include a nutritional hot lunch program; a bread bank, emergency food; clothing and household items, including children's clothing and bikes. They also run a furniture donation registry for beds and couches, self-help groups, a moms group, and they provide space for Al-Anon and other local self-help groups.

Until recently, the Women's Centre operated with a staff of three and approximately ten volunteers. Due to a lack of funding, the centre is now left with only one staff — its coordinator, Cheryl Lynne Peters. Cheryl Lynne has cut back on her hours and her pay so that the centre can remain open for a longer period. As it now stands, unless they receive the funding they have requested, the centre will close its doors on June 1.

In a typical month the centre helps approximately 200 to 300 women and receives between 100 and 200 phone inquiries, crisis calls and referrals. Cheryl Lynne recently told me a story of one of the women who goes to the centre once a week to get bread for her three children and herself. One day she walked in limping, and Cheryl Lynne asked if something was wrong. She said her feet hurt. When Cheryl Lynne looked down, she saw that the shoes she was wearing were really worn and didn't fit properly. She took her down to the area where they have clothes and shoes, and she came back out with a nice pair of shoes and clothes for her and her children.

The centre also arranged for the woman to get a food hamper. The woman was so grateful that she told Cheryl Lynne that without the centre, she could not live. She explained that she had moved to Pitt Meadows because of the low rent, but she didn't have a car, and she was barely making ends meet to take care of herself and her three children.

MINING INDUSTRY IN INTERIOR B.C.

J. Rustad: Everyone knows the impact that the mountain pine beetle is having on the central interior. The red menace is creating huge challenges, and government is working with municipalities, first nations and community-based groups to meet the challenges head-on. With the annual allowable cut expected to drop in the next seven to ten years, it's imperative that we help to create alternatives for the people working in the forest industry.

Mining presents one of the best opportunities to ensure that rural residents can continue to maintain the lifestyles they've chosen. A little more than a year ago

the province committed \$25 million for the creation of Geoscience B.C., whose job it is to identify mineral potential in the province and to provide the first glimpse of where resources might be found. This is absolutely essential, because if we're to diversify, we need to know where the resources are and provide the blueprint for exploration.

The central interior has been traditionally underexplored. The focus of Geoscience B.C. and mining companies is much welcome. We want the jobs, and we want the stability that the mining sector can bring. Mining provides good, family-supporting jobs. The average wage in the mining industry is \$94,000 a year, including benefits. Those are the kinds of jobs that can really help families build a future not just for themselves but for generations to come.

We all know there will be a transition period for our rural economy due to the mountain pine beetle. The prospect presented by mining — whether it's Mount Milligan or Prosperity in my riding, or an unknown deposit — means truck drivers, millwrights and loggers can stay in places they have come to call home. As mining thrives, it provides real optimism for the people of the central interior for a bright and prosperous future.

Oral Questions

SOFTWOOD LUMBER AGREEMENT

B. Simpson: Yesterday the Minister of Forests said that he was pleased the proposed softwood deal recognized first-mill price for remanufacturers. He stated on numerous occasions that this part of the deal is vital to the continued viability of the value-added sector.

My question is to the Minister of Forests and Range. Can the minister assure this House that every value-added mill and the workers that depend on these mills will be treated exactly the same under the proposed softwood deal?

[1425]

Hon. R. Coleman: Thank you to the member for his question. Under the deal, if a value-added manufacturer buys its lumber from a first mill, they pay first-mill price. If a value-added manufacturer is actually using its own wood from its own mill, they will be tied to a high-value cap.

B. Simpson: The opposition has obtained a copy of the proposed softwood agreement as of 10:10 this morning. According to this document, the first-mill price is only for companies operating independently from tenure holders — something the minister failed to mention yesterday. That means that thousands of jobs are still threatened in the value-added sector under the deal, depending on whether or not their mill qualifies for this first-mill price.

My question is to the Minister of Forests. Who will define the list of B.C. value-added mills that will survive this deal? Will it be this government? Will it be Ottawa, or will it be Washington, D.C.?

Hon. R. Coleman: Rather than react to a nonsensical question on information that's completely untrue in this particular case.... You do not have a copy of the deal, hon. member.

Mr. Speaker: Minister, through the Chair.

Hon. R. Coleman: The deal isn't written. It's being technically put together, hon. Speaker, right now with people in jurisdictions across this country.

What you may have in front of you is what somebody else's concept of the deal may be — hon. member, through the Speaker. But you do not have the softwood lumber deal in front of you.

Mr. Speaker: The member for Cariboo North has a further supplemental.

B. Simpson: I do, Mr. Speaker.

Interjections.

Mr. Speaker: Members.

B. Simpson: I saw the original terms of reference for this on April 27 and 28. We have obtained a copy of the deal, softwood lumber agreement between the government of Canada and the government of the United States of America, as of 10:10 this morning. What's clear in this deal, because the clause clearly stipulates that the value-added sector is defined as "independent of the tenure holders...." It states that a list of those mills that qualify will be contained in appendix 3. Appendix 3 is blank. This list of mills...

Interjections.

Mr. Speaker: Members.

B. Simpson: ...that will get the preferred pricing is critical to the long-term viability of communities and the jobs of workers who depend on this value-added sector.

Again, my question is to the Minister of Forests and Range. When will this list be defined, and when will Washington let our communities and our workers know which value-added mills are going to survive this deal and which mills are not?

Hon. R. Coleman: Mr. Speaker, through to the member: I don't care if you've got a draft of a document in front of you. I can tell you that even today in British Columbia, technical people are meeting with people from the ambassador's office of the United States with regards to what might be language contained in a softwood lumber agreement with Canada and the United States.

I can tell you that we have groups of people — on the legal language side, on the technical side and on the industry side — working right now with regards to this agreement. Because the member has a draft of something that whoever may have written.... He has it

in front of him. That he wants to purport it to be the final document or a document on softwood is completely incorrect.

[1430]

Hon. Speaker, through to the member: I want to remind you of this one little quote. "I think it's time to get serious. It's time to sit down at the table, provincial and federal governments together — I certainly hope that occurs — and get a deal worked out. I think it has been much too long." That was the Leader of the Opposition on the 17th of March.

Interjections.

Mr. Speaker: Members. The Leader of the Official Opposition has the floor.

C. James: I appreciate the Minister of Forests talking about how passionate I am in ensuring that we get a good deal for the softwood, that we get a good deal for British Columbia — not a deal at no cost. A deal good for the people of British Columbia — that's the difference.

The minister says he doesn't care. Well, I can tell you that the opposition cares, and certainly the people of British Columbia care. The member for Cariboo North has raised some very important questions about the softwood deal. This morning the Premier said his only concern with the agreement had to do with legal proceedings by the American government.

My question to the Premier is: how can the Premier say that was the only concern when we see in a draft agreement a concern about jobs and communities?

Hon. R. Coleman: I've been very clear that there is a value-added protection in this agreement, that there is a first-mill pricing in this agreement, that there's a high-value cap in this agreement. The member opposite may want to question in her mind whether she thinks this is a good deal for British Columbians, but I can tell the member opposite that I have spoken to the reman sector. I have spoken to the value-added sector. I have spoken to large industries and small. I can tell the member opposite that there is huge support in the B.C. forest sector for this deal.

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

C. James: I'm pleased to hear the Forests Minister has been talking to people, because that's exactly the direction that we as the opposition have been raising. It's important for the people of this province to be able to have a say on the softwood deal.

Interjections.

Mr. Speaker: Members. Members. We listened to the answer. Let's listen to the question.
Continue.

C. James: Let's take a look at the chronology here. The Premier said this was a great deal for British Co-

lumbia. The Forests Minister a little while later said this is the best deal B.C. could get. Then this morning we heard the Premier say it wasn't actually a deal; it's just a draft agreement.

So my question is very simple. British Columbians deserve to know the details of this agreement and how it will affect their jobs and their communities. Will the Premier assure British Columbians, before he signs off on the final agreement, that they will have an opportunity for a public debate on this deal?

Hon. G. Campbell: The softwood lumber negotiations have been ongoing for some time. There was a previous softwood lumber agreement which the Leader of the Opposition may not be aware of. We have a framework agreement that's in place, and as I said this morning, one of the things that is important as we go through this agreement is to get the details of the agreement in place.

I want the Leader of the Opposition and all the members of the opposition and all the people in British Columbia to hear this. These are B.C.'s forests. These will be B.C.'s laws. It will be B.C.'s forest practices that are put in place, and British Columbia's forest industry will continue to strive under a softwood agreement that will create stability and long-term opportunity for workers across this province, in the coast and in the interior.

[1435]

M. Farnworth: This side of the House has just told that side of the House that we have received a draft copy of the agreement as of 10:10 this morning. The Minister of Forests says it is a work-in-progress, and then he stands up and says: "But everyone signed on to the deal."

Well, that's not how it works. People sign on when there's a deal out there and they can see where everything is — where every "i" and "t" is dotted and crossed. Until that deal has been tabled in this House for the people of British Columbia to see, we are going to continue to ask questions to ensure that the rights of workers and communities in this province are protected in that deal.

Interjections.

Mr. Speaker: Members.

M. Farnworth: The problem is that the drafts of today have a problem of becoming the permanent text of tomorrow.

Once again, to the Premier: before this deal is done, will the people of this province have an opportunity to examine the deal, to have an open debate on the deal on the floor of this Legislature so that they can ensure that the interests of workers and forest companies and the public of British Columbia are protected in that deal?

Hon. R. Coleman: I should remind the member that this isn't the jobs and timber accord that we're....

Interjections.

Hon. R. Coleman: This is actually an international trade agreement between two countries that's getting done — something that hasn't been done in a long, long time. It's something that's going to actually settle some problems this country has faced for a long, long time. It's going to change even the international relationship between our two countries on a whole plethora of other files.

Through to the hon. member: I just want to have him think about this. Just after it was announced that there was a framework agreement, an e-mail came to my office from a small manufacturer in the Fraser Valley. He said this: "Thank you for getting this done. Tonight I will tell my 80 employees they have full-time work and a future with my company because of what you did."

GOVERNMENT RESPONSE TO FORESTRY CONCERNS IN PORT ALBERNI

S. Fraser: The Premier just eloquently stated that the trees in B.C. belong to the people of B.C. Well, the people of Port Alberni and the Alberni Valley have been watching thousands of truckloads of logs leave their valley, and they're coming here to the Legislature tomorrow out of frustration.

Two months ago the Minister of Forests and Range promised that he would visit Port Alberni and see the results of some of those forest policies on the ground. He discounted the concerns of those residents as private land issues. Well, in 2004 this government removed land — 70,000 hectares — from TFL 44 — outside of the public scrutiny and public rules. That was done without public consultation, and it was done against the advice of ministerial staff.

Since his government created the problems in Port Alberni, what will this minister do to correct them?

Hon. R. Coleman: It's interesting — this question coming in this tone from this member — when I actually told the member that the reason I didn't make it to Port Alberni during the break weeks is because I was buried, working on negotiations on the softwood lumber file to find a long-term solution for forestry in British Columbia.

If the member were actually paying attention, he would know that I've also spent a week in estimates debates. I've had two pieces of legislation in this House since that period of time, and — oh, by the way — I happened to go up to Port Alice to open a pulp mill that had been shut down, because the government did something. On Friday we opened the largest OSB plant in the world in Fort St. John.

[1440]

I also told the member at the time that I would get to Port Alberni after session. We only have three more days to go. The fact of the matter is.... The member is also aware of the fact that the coalition has concerns in the valley. The mayor of Port Alberni and other people

will be meeting with me tomorrow afternoon at three o'clock to discuss this very issue.

TRAFFIC SAFETY ON PATTULLO BRIDGE

B. Ralston: Five lives have been lost on the Pattullo Bridge this year — 15 since 2001. In almost all cases, speed has been a contributing factor. Surrey RCMP traffic operations sergeant Paul Mulvihill has noted that his division responds on a daily basis to incidents on the bridge. Prevention? The RCMP had this to say. "It's impossible to go on that bridge and do any enforcement."

What has been the response of the Solicitor General to the cry for a simple, cost-effective solution? He says: "It's not going to happen." For him, apparently, politics is more important than safety.

My question is to the Solicitor General. Will he make the safety of motorists on the Pattullo Bridge a priority and install a speed camera on the Pattullo Bridge?

Hon. J. Les: Traffic enforcement is an issue of concern for all of us in this House. I'm happy to report to the House that we've made numerous investments in policing resources across the province, specifically in the lower mainland as well. We have seen the largest increase in policing resources in British Columbia in a generation in the last four years.

Interjections.

Mr. Speaker: Members.

Hon. J. Les: As well, we have returned traffic fine revenues to municipalities. That's an additional \$50 million a year going into municipalities to help pay for policing. As well, we have integrated our policing resources in the province so that they are better able to operate interjurisdictionally to help address some of these issues.

B. Ralston: The same Sergeant Mulvihill says that there are no further police resources in the Surrey detachment to do any extra traffic enforcement on the Pattullo Bridge. There are others who have expressed the same view as myself.

The Minister of Transportation has said: "In the case of a fixed camera on a bridge, the thinking person would ask how different that is from intersection cameras that photograph people going through red lights." Indeed, Mr. Speaker.

Perhaps the Solicitor General can tell us how it is that his cabinet colleague readily recognizes the solution to the problem, and he doesn't. Will the Solicitor General make a commitment today to put safety first on the Pattullo Bridge?

Hon. J. Les: Let me be very clear. There are no plans to reintroduce photo radar in British Columbia.

I think I have also been very clear, in terms of my previous answer, that we have made numerous addi-

tional resources available to municipalities and to the police in British Columbia. If there are particular spots where increased enforcement is needed, the resources are there. It's a matter of allocation.

J. Brar: I think the minister needs to understand his portfolio more clearly. We are asking about the Pattullo Bridge, not the police. All the questions aren't about police. We understand about the police issue.

We do need a cost-effective and safe solution for the Pattullo Bridge. The situation is very clear. The city council of Surrey is on board. The RCMP is on board. All members of this side of the House are on board. Even the Minister of Transportation, from that side of the House, is on board. There is only one person who is refusing to take action, and that's the Minister of Public Safety and Solicitor General.

[1445]

Clearly, the minister is not listening to the people of British Columbia and the people of Surrey on this issue. We are not asking for photo radar. We are asking for a speed camera. The minister needs to understand that.

I will give one more chance to the minister. Will the minister commit today to implementing a proactive and effective solution to stem the carnage on the Pattullo Bridge?

Hon. J. Les: There seems to be one issue that the member opposite forgets about. That is the fact that it's actually TransLink that is responsible for the operation of the bridge. I am aware, as I suspect the member opposite is aware as well...

Interjections.

Mr. Speaker: Members.

Hon. J. Les: ...that they actually have plans to add certain features to the bridge that'll make it safer for people to drive. I applaud that response by TransLink. If there are any other bells and whistles they'd like to add to the bridge, obviously they're free to do that.

WAITING LISTS FOR CHILD CARE

D. Thorne: Quality child care must be available and accessible to the families that need it most when they need it. This government says it is committed to providing this. Yet they have no plan to deal with the growing wait-lists at child care centres across this province. For every available child care space, there are nine children who need it. That means nine sets of parents who may have to consider leaving the workforce because of their impossible situation.

This question is for the Minister of State for Child-care. This crisis is today, not tomorrow. What is your government going to do to address these growing wait-lists now?

Hon. L. Reid: This government is committed to the creation of quality child care experiences in British

Columbia, and our record speaks for itself. We very much want parents to have the opportunity to work, to study and to parent effectively. In the past ten months this government has created 1,500 new child care spaces.

Frankly, I would put our ten months up against the previous administration's ten years in terms of the creation of child care spaces in British Columbia — 1,498 spaces, an additional thousand spaces renovated in the province, so 2,500 opportunities for children to be in quality child care in British Columbia. That is our commitment. We have delivered on it.

Mr. Speaker: The member for Coquitlam-Maillardville has a supplemental.

D. Thorne: Well, according to the minister, things are going along just swimmingly. If that's the case, why is there a child care rally going on right now, as we speak, on the front lawn of the Legislature? There are hundreds of worried, frustrated and angry parents and their children on the front lawn. I was there; I spoke. I may have missed members from the opposite side, but I didn't see anybody there, because they think things are going along so swimmingly.

If things are so great in British Columbia and we have so many new spaces, why are there still 1,500 people on the waiting lists at Collingwood Neighbourhood House? Why does it take two years to get a child care space in Victoria? Does this minister not remember that it was her government that cut subsidies \$285 a month, forcing children out of child care centres and child care centres out of business?

When will this government finally admit they are failing B.C. families and make a real investment in child care in this province?

[1450]

Hon. L. Reid: Actions in British Columbia speak louder than words. The individuals we have consulted with across this province have asked for a lift in subsidy. We delivered. They asked for a lift in child care operating funding. We delivered. They asked for a lift in supported child development funding. We delivered. They asked for a lift in child care resource and referral funding. We delivered. Those supports are in place today for British Columbia families.

Interjection.

Mr. Speaker: Member.

Hon. L. Reid: I would invite any member opposite — other than continuing to build support for a rally — to actually be constructive, be proactive and build a child care space in British Columbia. We, indeed, have municipalities today that are partnering with us, school districts that are partnering with us, aboriginal communities and non-profits — people who are delivering in the best interests of British Columbia families. British Columbia will be better as a result.

FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE FOR IMMIGRANT STUDENTS

G. Robertson: This morning I was with a group of students in Vancouver who are desperately seeking help from the Minister of Advanced Education. They represent hundreds of students struggling to make sense of the decisions that are made by the B.C. student assistance program. They applied for and received grants, paid their tuition and started their studies. Now the government is going after them for those grants, plus interest. Debts are as high as \$11,000. Many are desperate. They've quit their studies and are working low-wage jobs just to try to cover their payments.

Somewhere between the private institutions and the government, the system failed these students. What is the Minister of Advanced Education doing to get to the bottom of this, and what is he going to do to help these students?

Hon. M. Coell: The province makes available yearly about \$300 million for student loans. Landed immigrants are treated like domestic students when they apply. Since the 1990s governments have audited about 5 percent of student loans every year. They also audit institutions. When those audits are done — and they agree to those audits before they receive their payments — it gives the credibility to the taxpayers for those programs.

I am aware of a number of the students that the member brings forward, because they've written me and copied him. We take those very seriously, and we're looking into them.

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

G. Robertson: These students are landed immigrants. Almost all are professionals from mainland China who came to B.C. to build a new life, to upgrade their degrees and credentials. What does that say about how we welcome new immigrants from China? They trusted this government for financial assistance. Now they have huge debts for an education they didn't get. Some are single mothers. Many are families with small children. The system messed up.

To date, the minister has let these people down. He's failed to release the audit information to help clear up the confusion. Will the minister commit today to personally intervene and find a way to help these new immigrant students?

Hon. M. Coell: The ministry intervened as soon as it got a letter from those students. We are working with student services to do audits on those institutions. We're doing audits that will, hopefully, help some of those students.

The member also asked me during estimates whether we would release that information. I told him that it would be done shortly and would be released to him shortly. He also asked for a lot of other reports —

he didn't need to go through freedom of information — which we just made available to him. That's another way that they can get the information they want. Just ask for it rather than go through freedom of information.

[End of question period.]

Petitions

D. Cubberley: I have a petition from 126 registered nurses that I would like to table in support of a comprehensive medical safety sharp regulation. [1455]

J. Kwan: I also rise to table a petition. This is a petition to ask the government to stop the emergency cuts at Mount Saint Joseph Hospital, along with seven endorsing organizations, which are the Chinese Benevolent Association, the Cheng Wing Yeong Tong, the Shon Yee Benevolent Association of Canada, the Chinese Freemasons of Canada national headquarters, the Gee How Oak Tin Association of Vancouver and the Taiwanese Canadian Cultural Society. Together there are 3,239 signatures.

M. Karagianis: I rise to present a petition. This is from residents in my riding who are opposed to the commercial endeavours at Royal Roads University. I have 119 signatures.

Orders of the Day

Hon. M. de Jong: Mr. Speaker, for the information of members, I call Committee of Supply in this chamber — the continued estimates of the Office of the Premier, and in the other House, Committee A, the continued estimates of the Ministry of Attorney General and Ministry Responsible for Multiculturalism.

Committee of Supply

ESTIMATES: OFFICE OF THE PREMIER
(continued)

The House in Committee of Supply (Section B); S. Hawkins in the chair.

The committee met at 2:59 p.m.

On Vote 9: Office of the Premier, \$12,482,000 (continued).

H. Bains: I ask leave to make an introduction.

Leave granted.

Introductions by Members

H. Bains: In the House today is my good friend, the person who was actually instrumental in my cam-

paign, Mr. Pardonsing Takur, and his wife, and they are joined by their guest. Would the House join me in welcoming them to this House, please.

[1500]

Debate Continued

C. James: Continuing on where we left off at lunch-time today, which was talking about health care and some of the challenges around the province and some specific examples of challenges around the province, I'd like to talk a little bit about the interior health region. As we know, the health region was hardest hit when it came to bed cuts. We saw one in five long-term care beds, almost a thousand beds in that region alone, cut by the Liberal government. The acute care bed cuts went even deeper: 24 percent of the beds were cut there.

Again, following along in a similar kind of discussion that we had this morning, where we talked about the impact of decisions that were made, my question to the Premier is: the crisis in the interior health region that's been raised by doctors, by nurses, by patients and families — does the Premier see a relationship between those specific beds in this region...? I'm not talking about the general numbers that the Premier was disputing this morning. I am talking about specific numbers in that region. Does the Premier see that those specific decisions to cut those beds in the interior health region had an impact on the quality of health care we see right now in the interior health region?

Hon. G. Campbell: You know, I think it's important to recognize that the Health estimates are actually carried out separately from the Premier's estimates.

I am glad to speak generally about what we've been trying to accomplish in health care. When we were elected government, we had 52 health authorities across the province consuming dollars and resources and taking away from people. We had a challenge with specialists in interior communities. We had a challenge with physicians in rural communities.

The approach that we've taken was to say that what we wanted to do was to expand the opportunity for workers. We expanded the opportunity for training across the province. We've expanded the investment across the province. The Interior Health Authority is a large health authority, and the details of the Interior Health Authority's plan can be canvassed in estimates. I'm surprised after 16 hours of estimates that these questions weren't canvassed.

I can tell you this. In Canada we have faced some substantial challenges; in British Columbia we have. I mentioned some of those this morning. The plan that we laid out provides for people, provides for facilities, provides for services, provides for substantial capital investment. We're going to continue to pursue those goals and those objectives.

Just to go back. Are there going to be challenges in health care? Of course there are. They're going to be ongoing. Are we making progress? Yes, we're making substantial progress.

If I can just talk for a moment about what we are trying to do in health care, because I think that's important. We, frankly, very seldom hear from the opposition about what their objectives are. Our objective was to fill a substantial human resource deficit that was allowed to build up over the 1990s. It's going to be a challenge that's ongoing not only as the population ages and puts more demands on the health care system but as the health care providers age and decide that they want to go and do something else.

I think the fact is, under the current circumstances where we watch as the province has invested over \$3.5 billion more in the last five and a half years in our health care system, that we have to look at how we can deal with those resources in a more positive way. The reason that we want to engage British Columbians and the opposition in a discussion about how we improve health care for them is that it's actually all of us that are going to have to be part of that solution.

We've invested substantial new resources in health prevention. That's not going to pay off in the next month. It's going to pay off in the next number of years — maybe over the next decade. We are trying to encourage British Columbians to be more physically active.

All of those things will take place in the interior. They'll take place in the lower mainland. They'll take place in the north. There have been significant investments in the interior health region to try and provide facilities for people, better locations for specialists to be located, whether it's in Kamloops or in Cranbrook or in other communities in the interior.

I think that the Interior Health Authority has had some challenges. They have tried to deal with those up-front. They've dealt with them openly, and I think they've made real progress over the last number of years.

[1505]

C. James: It's very clear the Premier is uncomfortable when I'm asking questions around health care and would prefer that I only ever asked the Health Minister those questions. Reality is that the Premier made health care an issue of the Premier's office. He might remember back to his own throne speech, which mentioned that health care was a priority for the Premier and government. I think it's only approachable to ask the Premier questions on health care when the Premier has stated very clearly that this is an issue of importance to him, so I'll continue on to ask another specific question.

Yesterday we learned that emergency physicians at Mount Saint Joseph will not be cut, that emergency service, in fact, is going to remain the same for seven months. If the June 1 cut had gone ahead, only one doctor would have been available at Mount Saint Joseph's emergency between 8 a.m. and 8 p.m. The cancellation of the cut, as we all know, is a huge victory for patients, the community who spoke out and the doctors who spoke out.

Can the Premier please tell us where the funding for this expansion of care is coming from? Will it come from the Ministry of Health, or will it come from the internal budget of Providence Health?

Hon. G. Campbell: I'm pleased to talk about this, because the Leader of the Opposition has raised it.

What is the government? What is our vision? What did we raise in the throne speech? We raised the fact that health care in Canada needs to be sustainable. Here's the choice. The opposition faces it, too, and frankly, I don't hear anything from the opposition. I've heard no vision from the opposition on what to do. The fact of the matter is: we have to decide whether we want our health care system to be sustainable or not. Do we want the next generation and the generation of Canadians that follow them to have a sustainable, long-term health care system? We want it to be sustainable. We believe that we have to engage the people of British Columbia in that discussion.

I had the opportunity to go and visit four separate countries around Europe that had actually done better than British Columbia in a lot of cases, and better than Canada in a lot of cases, in meeting the needs that their people had identified. I think it's important to go outside of the province to hear what else is happening, to see how we can do better.

Now, we've heard from the opposition that you shouldn't go outside, or you should go outside, that you should have a conversation, or you shouldn't have a conversation. Everybody knows what to do.

Well, I can tell you that the opposition doesn't know what to do, hon. Chair. This is what we know. The challenge for me is not that I don't want to talk about health care; it's that the Leader of the Opposition doesn't much like the facts.

Here are the facts. There has been a 56-percent increase in the funding for physicians at Mount Saint Joseph. A 56-percent increase — that's important. It's trying to provide support. It's also important to note that what we've said to health authorities, what we say to people that are responsible for carrying these things out is.... We ask them to make the best decisions for their communities and their facilities to maximize health care benefits for people, to maximize the benefits for patients.

Now, maybe the opposition would like to do something else. Maybe they think it's better to go back to what they had in the 1990s. Certainly, they all supported it then. Maybe they think it's better not to have a plan. Maybe they think it's better not to face up to the challenges we have in health care. Maybe they think we shouldn't invest in physicians. Maybe they think we shouldn't invest in nurses. We sure haven't heard what they think we should do.

We've been investing in emergency wards. We've been investing in capital plans. We've been investing in equipment. We've been investing in MRIs. We've been investing in new dialysis equipment, going across the province. We've been investing in new electronic health, new opportunities for e-health. All of those things are aimed at raising the quality of health care in British Columbia.

Again, the opposition, the critic, the leader are very confused. They're so confused that they don't even know what Health estimates are for, hon. Chair. Health

estimates are for the opposition critic to come and deal directly with the minister responsible, with the ministry officials. They can deal with all the details of the questions that are there. There were 16 hours of estimates that were available for them to pursue these things and to discuss them. I believe that that's the way the estimates should be.

Where are we going in health care? Where we're going is capital investments — literally billions of dollars in capital investments over the next number of years — education, training, reaching out with a stable workforce that we're able to work with in partnership to build even better quality health care for British Columbians.

When we started out in the throne speech, we said we had to ask ourselves some questions. Do we believe that in the health care system that sustainability should be another principle for the Canada Health Act?

[1510]

What do we mean by accessibility? What do we mean by portability? I can tell you that in British Columbia we have a far, far more enhanced health service than many other provinces in the country. That's why we're rated number one by the Conference Board of Canada.

We have to move forward. We've invested literally billions of additional dollars. We're looking forward to continuing to improve the quality of care, the quality of services for people across the province.

That's what improving ambulance service was about. It's what putting defibrillating machines in ambulances was about. It's what increasing training for ambulance attendants was about. It was about working with the B.C. ambulance association to make sure that we've made that work for everybody in the province as a front-line provider of health care.

If you go to the north today, you'll find that they don't have nearly the challenges that they had just six years ago. If you go to Cranbrook today, they'll tell you they have additional specialists and additional physicians.

If you go to just about any hospital, they'll tell you they've got more nurses than they did. We need more still. That's why we're training them. That's why we've created a 62-percent increase in funding for nurse training. That's why we've increased the number of nurses that are in the system.

We've got more to do. We'll keep doing it. We'll work with the health authorities to do it. We'll work with communities to do it, and we'll work with patients to do it. We'll continue to lead the country.

C. James: Well, we're going to continue to make the Premier uncomfortable and ask health care questions, because the public expects the Premier of this province to answer questions on the most important issue facing British Columbians right now. They expect that the Premier would answer questions about health care. I find it extraordinary that the Premier would lecture us to say that we shouldn't be asking questions on health care, one of the key issues to the people of this province and one of the key issues, in fact, on the Premier's own agenda.

The Premier headed off to Europe to study health care without the Health Minister, so that would certainly leave the public believing that health care is a key issue the Premier wishes to look at. I find it extraordinary that the Premier would once again lecture us on asking questions of importance to the people of British Columbia — extraordinary.

I also find it incredible that the Premier would say that he hasn't been listening to any ideas from the opposition. Well, he may not have been listening, and the Health Minister may not have been listening, but certainly the communications people for government have been listening, because every time we raise an issue, they solve it.

Whether it's, in fact, emergency room funding, whether it's a doctor in Creston, whether it's funding for Mount Saint Joseph, whether it's long-term care beds reopened after we raised a question — issue after issue after issue we have raised — the Premier and the Health Minister continue to deny that there's a challenge. But miraculously, after the issue is raised, we find that the government starts paying attention to this issue.

I think it's a very sad statement when health care is done to get issues out of the headlines instead of as the right thing to do. My question back to the Premier, very specific: can the Premier assure the House that no other health services will be cut at Mount Saint Joseph as a result of the changed plan in emergency care?

Hon. G. Campbell: Let me just say that in terms of the challenges we face with the opposition, they tend to say one thing one day and another the next, depending on what the circumstances are.

In terms of Mount Saint Joseph, what we're doing is working with Providence. The Health Ministry will work with Providence. They will work with the professionals there. They will have a plan that will be in place that will work in the best interests of the people who use that facility. That's what the goal is. That's what we're going to do.

C. James: No answer, once again, as we've seen with almost every specific question we have asked on health care, on issues that matter to people in communities, so I'm going to try again. On behalf of those communities and those patients who are struggling, a question around Kelowna.

[1515]

We have seen, again, code purple at Kelowna General, and when doctors were asked why it was that patients weren't sent to nearby hospitals in Penticton, in Vernon, in Oliver, in Osoyoos, in Summerland or in Princeton, the doctors simply laughed. They said it was impossible because Kelowna General was already the overflow hospital for the region suffering because of cuts in beds by the Liberal government.

Again, my question to the Premier: will he accept that there were decisions made by the Liberal government that impacted the code purples that we're seeing at Kelowna General Hospital?

Hon. G. Campbell: As was pointed out in the House the other day, there was a code purple the other day in the Kelowna hospital. Unfortunately, there was a major vehicle accident. There were three vehicles involved. It was resolved within an hour.

Hon. Chair, I'm glad to engage the Leader of the Opposition with regard to what we've done in health care. We have literally invested millions of dollars in health care in terms of the emergency health facilities we've done. We've invested \$7 million in putting together a plan that's brought everyone together. It's been something the government has been working on for some time. We've got \$100 million in renovating emergency rooms across the province.

Is there pressure in health care? Yes, there's pressure. The fastest-growing economic region of the province happens to be the Thompson-Okanagan. The Okanagan Valley is a very fast, vibrant, healthy community. People are moving there. We're going to have to have a capital plan that responds to that, and it will take time for that plan to be in place.

But let's be clear. As we look to the future in health care in this government, we are asking people.... We're glad to hear from the opposition. The opposition wants to deal with operational matters down in different hospitals. That's what they did when they were in government. That's why they wasted so much of the taxpayers' dollars. That's why they didn't have a real plan, because they kept on trying to interfere from Victoria.

We're not trying to do that. We're trying to say to health authorities: "Your responsibility is to manage this system." The accountability contracts are there between health authorities and the government — what they're trying to deliver.

We do have some questions to ask, though. What do comprehensive and portable mean to Canadians, given the wide disparity that takes place across this country? What do we mean by reasonable access and medically necessary? Those are questions that we have to ask ourselves. We have to ask ourselves whether it really matters to patients whether services are delivered by a private facility or a public facility if, in fact, the public is paying. Those are issues that we should be asking ourselves. Those are issues that are part of what we should discuss as we move ahead.

Why shouldn't we build our health care system on a foundation of sustainability? I can tell you that in health authorities across this province, they have seen significant increases in their budgets — over 20-percent increases in their budgets. They have seen renewed opportunities for them to manage their budgets within their systems, within their regions of the province. We've seen an increase in improvement of services across British Columbia.

That's what we've asked them to do. That does not mean there are not challenges. I can tell you again. The opposition may turn a blind eye to this, but the fact is we've made real progress in British Columbia in the last six years. We'll continue to make progress, and it would be so much more positive if the opposition could have constructive and positive ways that they

may be able to respond to that progress so that we can build on our successes as we move into the future.

C. James: I'm kind of reminded of my days when my children were young. You play hide and seek, and they'd cover their eyes and think it makes them disappear.

Ignoring the problem doesn't make it go away. Pretending the problem isn't there doesn't make the problem go away. That's what we continue to hear from this government. The only approach that this government is using in health care is the hands-off approach. Blame the health authority, unless the issue hits the headline, and then scramble to try and fix the issue. That's the government's health care approach.

I'm going to continue to ask specific questions in this venue and every other venue, because the people of this province deserve answers. They certainly aren't hearing them today or yesterday or the day before from either the Premier or the Health Minister.

Now I'd like to touch on Kamloops. Again, we've seen direct links from the doctors in Kamloops, who have talked about the bed cuts and the pressures they're seeing in emergency rooms. In fact, we even saw the MLA for that particular area raise concerns.

[1520]

In the area around Kamloops there were 200 residential care beds and 24 percent of long-term care beds cut, and 32 percent of acute care beds gone. That's 15 percent of the acute care beds at the hospital right now that are occupied with seniors because of the cuts that were made.

As I've been trying, in the morning and again this afternoon, to get the Premier to acknowledge the ramifications of the decisions of his government to not build the 5,000 long-term care beds and to cut acute care beds at the same time.... Does the Premier recognize that the problem in Kamloops is directly related to the decisions made by his government?

Hon. G. Campbell: Hon. Chair, I want to be clear to the Leader of the Opposition. I do think, in fact, these regional questions are appropriate. I think they're appropriate to be asked in Health estimates when we have Health officials here who can help respond to them in detail. In 16 hours those questions were not asked.

Let me be clear about this. Let's talk about Kamloops. Kamloops is actually one of the symbols of NDP failure. Kamloops is a symbol of NDP broken promises. The NDP, when they were seeking office in the early '90s, said that there was going to be a new cancer centre in Kamloops. That was part of their election platform. Within weeks they said: "Oh no, never mind. Don't pay any attention to us; we didn't really mean that."

There's a significant difference between this side of the House and that side of the House. This is what we've been able to do in Kamloops. One hundred residential care beds have opened in Kamloops Seniors Village in September of 2004. An 84-residential-care-bed facility will be open this year in 2006. Seventy-six

assisted-living units will be opened at Bedford Manor. As well, 137 residential care beds and ten assisted-living units are planned to be opened in 2008. Six residential care beds at Marjorie Willoughby hospice house opened in February of '05. Eight residential care beds are planned for the Overlander lodge in 2008. Thirty-two independent housing units in Greenfield Place opened in 2002. Residential care beds are being offered across Kamloops, and we're improving and upgrading those.

On top of that, we invested in the emergency facilities in Kamloops by \$28 million. We provided a 44-bed psych unit in Kamloops to benefit the people of that particular thing. There are more ALC beds in Ponderosa Lodge.

The fact is, in Kamloops.... We see it as a major centre for regional activities. We're going to continue to work with the IHA with regard to Kamloops. We're going to continue to work with physicians. This is what I think would be clear if you talk to anyone from Kamloops. They would say that we have made real improvements there.

Now, I understand that the Leader of the Opposition also doesn't want to reflect back on what she said. This is what the Leader of the Opposition has said: "We shouldn't do things exactly the same way." We agree with that. "We could, in fact, provide better services for patients." We agree with that, and we've done that. "There will always be cost pressures and never enough money for health care." That's true.

My question to the Leader of the Opposition is: how would she allocate the additional \$3.5 billion that we put into the health services? This is how we allocated them: human resources, more procedures, more equipment, more capital plant, more quality services for the people of British Columbia.

The Leader of the Opposition says: "My answer is a better, more efficient public health care system achieved through innovation." We are recognized by everyone except the opposition for the innovations that have been established in British Columbia, for the progress that has been made from British Columbia. We are asked on an ongoing basis to explain what we're doing in British Columbia so other jurisdictions can pick that up. Whether it's in Pharmacare, whether it's in wait-list services, whether it's in cancer services, we've been asked, and we respond.

I can tell you this. For all of the Leader of the Opposition's comments that we've heard over the last little while, in British Columbia we've got great doctors, we've got great nurses, and we've got health authorities that are working on behalf of the communities they serve. That's why we're number one in the country.

[1525]

C. James: I think that's a new definition of innovation: to actually not keep your promise and not build 5,000 long-term care beds; to close acute care beds; and to leave the health care system in chaos. In fact, that's what we've seen as the direction of the Liberal government. If the Premier calls that innovation, I have a different definition of innovation, I can tell you.

I want to talk specifically about Ponderosa Lodge, since the Premier, in fact, raised the issue of Ponderosa Lodge. The lodge was actually closed in the summer of 2004, and within days the hospital in Kamloops reported a significant bed crunch due to the increase of seniors coming to the hospital for health care. That's a direct result of the government's decision to close beds, and it puts the pressure in the hospital, with seniors.

This is a hospital that has had significant challenges with its ER, as I said earlier. They've had to cancel surgeries. They have bed shortages. I've toured that hospital a couple of times and now see the permanent beds in the hallways in that hospital.

The Premier talked this morning, when we were talking in estimates, about the fact that when they closed facilities, seniors went somewhere else. Well, we know exactly where seniors went. Seniors went to hospitals. They went to hallways. They went to closets. They're in hospitals that now are overcapacity — as routine, not as exception.

My question is: does the Premier still believe that when facilities like Ponderosa Lodge were closed, those seniors went somewhere else other than hospitals?

Hon. G. Campbell: First, I was pleased to hear that the Leader of the Opposition was going to define for us what innovation was, and I'd like to hear from her what she thinks innovation is.

One of the interesting innovations they might discover in the opposition is to get the facts right. The Ponderosa Lodge never closed completely in Kamloops. It has been used for transition beds. It will continue to be used for transition beds until the transition is complete. But it did not close.

It's interesting to hear the Leader of the Opposition go on. She called for a more efficient public health care system. As I said today, what we've been trying to do is provide a continuum of care across the system — palliative care, mental health illness services, addiction services, acute care beds. There's been an increase in the number of beds in the province under health services of 5 percent. We're trying to distribute those appropriately.

We're investing in new facilities in Kamloops, as I just read. I'd be glad to read it out again if the opposition leader would like to hear it: 32 housing units in Greenfield Place in 2002; 100 residential care beds, Kamloops Seniors Village, and 84 residential care beds are going to be opened by 2006; 76 assisted-living units have opened in Bedford Manner.

I'd invite the opposition leader to go and talk with those folks. If they talk with them, they'll find out that we've actually improved the quality of care and the quality of services they receive. That's what we set out to do.

So Ponderosa Lodge has been used for transition services. The fact is that you can't run all health care from Victoria. We saw what happened when the NDP tried to do that. We lost nurses. We lost doctors. We had communities saying they couldn't get specialists. We had communities saying that the NDP government wasn't living up to its commitment.

I can tell you this. When we committed the 44-bed psych ward, we delivered on the 44-bed psych ward. When we committed on telehealth, we delivered on telehealth into Kamloops. When we committed to improve the investments in emergency, we delivered on those investments in emergency.

I think the actual challenge that we face here is that we do have to set goals. We do have to set standards. We do that in Victoria. We have accountability contracts that are signed between the Health Ministry and the health authorities. We audit those contracts. There are times when things don't work the way they're supposed to. We recognize that. We try and remedy that as quickly as we possibly can.

But I do know this. There are more procedures taking place in British Columbia now. There is more access in British Columbia now in the Interior Health Authority, in the Coastal Health Authority and the Vancouver Island Health Authority. There are more patients who are given better care today than there were just five or six years ago. That's a tribute, frankly, to the people in the authorities and in the hospitals and in our health care facilities that are providing services to patients across British Columbia.

C. James: I think it's unfortunate. It's the seniors and the hospitals and the people who provide health care who have been suffering because the government, in fact, didn't follow through on their commitment to build 5,000 long-term care beds.

[1530]

The Premier likes to list the commitments that he followed through on. That's a key commitment that he made and that his government made to the seniors of British Columbia and to the people who work in the health care field, who've had to spend the last five years with the government telling them that everything was fine in health care when they've seen the reality every single day, when they've tried to tell the government the reality every single day, and when they've been completely ignored by this government.

I'm glad Premier raised the issue of accountability. That's the next issue I want to move on to, but I want to touch on it related to health care for a moment. In fact, what this government has done in their health care plan is move to having unaccountable health authorities who have not involved communities in decisions or in planning and whom the government then uses as an opportunity to blame someone else instead of taking responsibility for their own actions.

We've seen it in the issue, for example, of the Ministry of Children and Families, where the government for years refused to be accountable for the decisions that they made — which caused difficulty for children and families at risk in this province for five years — until we saw Judge Hughes come forward with the report. The government could no longer ignore the fact that they caused the chaos we've seen.

It's exactly the same kind of issue in health care today, where the government refuses to acknowledge that they made the decision not to build the long-term

care beds, that they made the decision to close down long-term care facilities, and that they made the decision to close acute care beds, which has caused the chaos that we see today. That's not accountability, and that's certainly not health planning.

Moving on to the issue of accountability. I think this is an important place for us to have a conversation with the Premier and to talk about openness and accountability under this government. We've seen, under this government, the Premier make a number of decisions that have, in fact, decreased accountability and transparency and have promoted secrecy over openness.

I'll just give some examples. The cuts to the Auditor General. The cuts to the Ombudsman. The cuts to the freedom-of-information office. The outright elimination of other independent watchdogs, such as the Human Rights Commission and the Children's Commission. Bill 75, the Significant Projects Streamlining Act, which allowed the government to override municipalities. Exemption of B.C. Ferries from FOI. The government's refusal to debate their pre-election budget. There are many other examples that we'll get into talking about over the next couple of hours. Of course, as we've seen in this session, the government has attempted to restrict public access to information through changes to the Public Inquiry Act and FOI.

I'm not going to talk about bills that are in front of this House, but I would like to discuss aspects of recent legislation that have decreased transparency and to also canvass the issue of open government a little bit more. Here are just a couple of quotes to start off, since the Premier tends to forget his words from the past, which show the Premier's direction around openness and transparency when he was in opposition.

This is a Premier who said: "When government does its business behind closed doors, people will invariably believe the government has something to hide. Secrecy feeds distrust and dishonesty. Openness builds trust and integrity."

Here's one more quote from the then opposition leader. "A direct link between democracy, open government and freedom of information. The fundamental principle must be this." The then opposition leader said: "Government information belongs to the people, not to government. This means, among other things, that all citizens must have timely, effective and affordable access to the documents which governments make and keep. Governments should facilitate access, not obstruct it."

So given those comments and given many other comments that the Premier has made about open government, about transparent government, I would like to ask the Premier a very simple question. What actions does he believe his government has made that in fact reduce openness and transparency?

[1535]

Hon. G. Campbell: I'm going to start with some of the preamble to that question. The Leader of the Opposition wonders what this government has done for seniors and what we haven't done. Again, I would point

out that we have invested over a billion dollars over the last five years in improving the quality of facilities.

The last thing I had expected when we were elected in 2001 was that the previous government, in spite of its incompetence, in spite of its mismanagement, would have allowed our seniors facilities to deteriorate to the level that they did. The Leader of the Opposition may want to run from that record, but it was her record. She ran on that record, and she said that she accepted it and embraced it and encouraged British Columbians to go forward with that.

We did a different approach. We said we were going to go forward. We were going to provide for the improvements in those facilities. We were going to make sure that people could live in quality care. We'd rehabilitate if necessary. We'd relocate if it was necessary. We'd build new units. We are doing that, and we've been very clear with that.

Beyond that, we are modernizing residential care beds and assisted-living units. There are 2,700 new units that will be in place by December of 2006. We have expanded Independent Living B.C. — 3,500 housing units by December of '06. We have expanded home support programs, which includes daily living, meals and day care. We have reduced average wait times for residential care from 365 days in the 1990s to 90 days.

MSP has been reduced for 290,000 British Columbians. Pharmacare has been reduced for 280,000 British Columbians. Seniors across British Columbia who are on a fixed income know that their income taxes have been dramatically reduced, to zero if they happen to have \$15,000 a year. If it's just less than that, they're still the lowest income taxes in Canada that we are providing to seniors.

We will obviously be held to account by the electorate, and we look forward to that. We look forward to a real debate about who has delivered on health care and who did not.

As we move ahead, I think it's also important that we look at the record in terms of accountability of this government. Currently we have one of the strongest freedom-of-information acts in the country. It includes a commission that's independently appointed by an all-party committee. There are more bodies that are included in that act than in any other Canadian jurisdiction. That is an important step in terms of openness, and I'm proud that this government did that.

We've increased the gross budget for the Auditor General by over 30 percent since the year 2000. We have a procurement governance office that's right there under the comptroller general. We've depoliticized the appointment process. There is a Merit Commissioner in place. There is now a new openness for Crown corporations, whether it's B.C. Hydro or B.C. Ferries or ICBC.

We introduced the Lobbyists Registration Act. We are constantly in keeping with the FOI legislation that's been in place. We're proud of those initiatives.

In terms of the Legislature, we expanded our question period to 30 minutes. Much to the opposition's chagrin, we expanded it to 30 minutes.

Specifically to the issue of freedom of information, the only changes that have been made have been posi-

tive improvements, including adding approximately 50 public bodies to the act, including the Forest Practices Board and the provincial Agricultural Land Commission. It now covers more public bodies than any jurisdiction in Canada.

We've simplified the process for adding public bodies. We've provided for privacy impact assessments. We've provided and extended privacy protection to include personal information. We've brought together a review by an all-party committee which takes place every six years.

There's greater flexibility for the officer to actually manage his affairs, to say: "This is not a request," or "I will pursue these other requests because they're more important."

I think that if you go across the country, you would have difficulty finding a province that had been more open than the province of British Columbia.

C. James: I find it interesting that some of the areas that the Premier referred to in fact were our suggestions to the Premier, including the 30-minute question period to make government more open and transparent.

Let's look at a specific example that the government put forward. That is section 9 of the miscellaneous bill that was passed in the House yesterday. This bill was passed, and the government's intent was to change the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act. The Premier....

[1540]

The Chair: Member. Just a reminder that only the administrative action of a department is open to debate so that only matters involving the administrative actions of a department are to be discussed in Committee of Supply. Matters involving legislation cannot be discussed in Committee of Supply. That has been the practice of this chamber.

C. James: Thank you, Madam Chair. I'll continue on, then, to ask the Premier about changes the government has looked at for freedom of information over this past year. Could the Premier explain some of those changes that the government proposed to make this year to freedom of information, and how they make sure that government is more open and transparent?

Hon. G. Campbell: As the Leader of the Opposition knows, the estimates for the ministry responsible for freedom of information are yet to be canvassed. I would recommend all of those questions go to that estimates period. Let me just say that the full policy discussions can take place during those estimates if the Leader of the Opposition would like to do that — the Ministry of Labour and Citizens' Services.

Let me go back. What we have done as a government is expand the reach of information and privacy. It lays out rules for how documents should be returned. We've closely done this in consultation with the freedom-of-information and protection-of-privacy commissioner. We have been very clear that we are

open to recommendations from that independent officer of the Legislature. He can report through to a standing committee, and they can make recommendations to the House.

I think the thrust the government has had has been exactly what I outlined before. I think it's important to note that when I did outline it, I said there will always be requests for more. That's good, and that's healthy in a democratic society. We're glad to hear those ideas. They will be properly processed through the minister. I think the policy is to be open and accountable.

When we're recognized by the Auditor General of Canada for the appointment process that's been established by our government, that's good news for British Columbians. When we have an Auditor General who recognizes that we are the only jurisdiction in the country that actually keeps our books in terms of generally accepted accounting principles, that is good news for British Columbians.

We have said quite clearly that we want to inform British Columbians about what's taking place. There are quarterly reports. They see what's taking place. There are public accounts. They see what's taking place. We open up our government to make sure that people do see what's taking place, so they can offer suggestions on how we can move ahead.

Our strategic plan is very clear in terms of our vision and core values. We want to be known as a fiscally responsible jurisdiction. We want to be recognized for the accountability that we hold ourselves to and that citizens can hold us to. We want to be recognized as a government of integrity that deals with citizens openly and directly, and we will continue to pursue that.

The details of the questions the opposition leader is suggesting right now, though, are properly and correctly pursued under the estimates of the Minister of Labour and Citizens' Services.

C. James: I'm sorry for ruining the Premier's day by asking health care questions that he didn't want to answer and wanted asked to the Health Minister. Now he doesn't want to answer questions around freedom of information and openness. I'm going to continue asking those questions regardless, because the Premier has stated that one of his goals is to be the most open and transparent government ever. Therefore, it seems reasonable to ask those questions of the Premier directly.

Let's talk about changes that the government has made over the history of their five years. In 2002 the government announced it was cutting the budget of the FOI office by 35 percent for three years running, 2002 to 2005, a decision that had a severe impact on the workings of this office, including the appeal process. Does the Premier think this decision helped openness and transparency?

Hon. G. Campbell: The Leader of the Opposition wants to go back, so let's go back. Let's go back to what her party did — what the NDP did. Let's look back at how her party actually treated the people of British Columbia.

[1545]

The fudge-it budget now is known as a case study across the country for misleading citizens. That was the NDP. We brought in the Budget Accountability Act. We have accountability for ministers. We have service plans now. There were never service plans before this government came forward. You can look at a three-year plan for any ministry of this government.

In fact, if the NDP was doing some of its homework occasionally, they could actually use those plans to help any government move forward — to look for good and positive suggestions that could be used to enhance the plans and look ahead. If we look at accountability for ministers, I can tell you right now that if we had ministers in the NDP, they wouldn't be getting any salary whatsoever for the way they mismanaged this government.

As we look ahead in the province of British Columbia and as we look at the strategic plans we have put in place, we have opened up our government in a way that has never been opened up before. In education, for the first time ever, we're providing people with class-size information so they can make their choices. They can see what's taking place in the province. That's open government.

We're going to continue that process. We're going to continue including citizens. Even the Auditor General has said to us that this is a jurisdiction that other jurisdictions should be emulating because of the way we're keeping our books, because of the way we're doing things. We have done an exceptional job. This government has done an exceptional job, as have the public servants, in opening up this process — the ideas of government — to the people of British Columbia so they can share with us in building an even more prosperous future for this province.

C. James: A straightforward question: did the cuts that the Premier made between 2002 and 2005 impact openness and transparency?

Hon. G. Campbell: The fact of the matter is that we inherited a \$4.4 billion deficit. We inherited a health care system in disarray. We inherited an education system that was closing parents out of the system, where they actually said to parents: "You're not allowed to volunteer in the school."

What we said, and what we ran on, was that we were going to bring in a balanced budget by our third complete budget. I'm proud to say we were able to do that. As we did that, we opened up government in British Columbia. As we did that, we opened up our books in British Columbia so people knew that there were actually books they could rely on.

You don't get four credit upgrades in the province without hard work and without being open. That is a measure of openness in British Columbia.

When the Auditor General says that we have set the standard that others should follow, that is a measure of openness in British Columbia. That's an important measure that everyone in this province should take pride in.

The Chair: I would like to remind the member that we are debating the estimates of the 2006-2007 budget.

C. James: Continuing on with decisions made by the Premier, which are direct decisions related to the Premier's responsibility — therefore, the Premier's office. These are questions that have to do with openness and accountability. It is a key part, a key platform of this government. Therefore, I would expect these are pretty basic questions that should be answered by the Premier. We didn't get an answer to the last question, so I'm going to try another specific change made by the government to the FOI Act in 2002. It gave cabinet broad discretionary power to designate any work done by committees that include a cabinet minister to be immune from any access.

The Chair: Member, again, we are in the 2006-2007 budget year. The question should be relevant to the budget that's before us.

C. James: Continuing on. Were decisions that the Premier made...?

The Chair: Member, if you could just explain how that is relevant to the estimates at hand today.

C. James: I can. We didn't see an increase in the freedom-of-information budget in this year. That's an issue when you take a look at past history of this government around freedom of information and past history where the budget has been decreased by the government.

You would expect that the government, perhaps, would look at increasing the budget and putting back some of those resources that were taken out — to increase openness and transparency. You would expect, perhaps, the government would take a look at some of the past history issues and make changes this year to increase openness and accountability.

My question to the Premier is: did he think there were any changes that needed to be made to the freedom of information, based on past decisions of his government, which would have improved openness and transparency this year?

[1550]

Hon. G. Campbell: There's no question that the full policy discussion and budget debate is entirely the purpose of the upcoming Labour and Citizens' Services discussions, but as I've said to the Leader of the Opposition earlier, the....

Interjection.

Hon. G. Campbell: Excuse me, hon. Chair.

The Chair: Continue, Mr. Premier.

Hon. G. Campbell: I'm not going to continue until the member decides that he's going to take his place.

The actions this government have taken are very clear. We've increased the budget since 2001-2002. We are going to continue to work with the Information and Privacy Commissioner. As we do that, I am sure we will continue to build on our record of being the most open and accountable government in Canada.

C. James: My question: did the Premier ever take a look at including some of the key bodies that they've excluded over the last number of years?

I'll start one at a time. B.C. Ferries. Did the Premier ever consider, this year, including B.C. Ferries in freedom of information?

Hon. G. Campbell: We decided to follow the same course that was plotted earlier with regard to B.C. Ferries. It is an independent agency. It relies on private sector resources.

B.C. Ferries, we believe, is more accountable and more open now than it has ever been before. There is a Ferry commissioner. There is an independent board. There are strict public disclosure requirements. There's an independent audit. There's a requirement for public hearings for B.C. Ferries up and down the coast.

Transport Canada regulates all of the safety requirements. Frankly, Transport Canada regulates B.C. Ferries, who are subject to federal FOI legislation. So we made the decision that B.C. Ferries would be treated very similarly to B.C. Rail. We believe it is, frankly, a more open and more public process than it has ever been in the history of the organization.

C. James: Did the Premier ever consider having VANOC subject to FOI?

Hon. G. Campbell: VANOC is not a provincial organization. Again, I think it's important for the opposition to spend some time to see how these structures are created.

VANOC is a partnership between the Canadian Olympic Committee, the federal government, the provincial government, the city of Vancouver and the city of Whistler. Clearly, once again, VANOC is independently audited. Those records are available for people. Since it is not a member of British Columbia's entity, it is not included.

C. James: Another specific example. I want to ask the Premier whether, this year, he has considered making any changes to.... B.C. is the only known jurisdiction in Canada where the names of individual requesters are actually provided to communications aides for political purposes as a matter of routine.

This is a new policy that was implemented by the government where so-called troublesome requesters are identified by name at the top of the documents provided to ministers. The responses to these requesters — the media, the opposition, stakeholder groups — are routinely delayed by this government. This practice, in fact, led to an investigation by the commissioner. I'd like the Premier to please explain to us how

this policy of his government actually fits with the views about being open and transparent?

Hon. G. Campbell: It's interesting, again, for me that the Leader of the Opposition doesn't, I guess, recognize what the common practice has been, including under the previous NDP government. What we use today with regard to disclosures is the same practice that was used previously. It's no different today than it was before. It's not a practice that we intend to use or that we do use regularly.

[1555]

In fact, under section 33 of the act, confirmed in the commissioner's ruling of 1996, individuals representing public bodies may have their names shared with government staff when appropriate. The practice is not used very regularly. It is not a common practice in government, and it is not a violation of freedom-of-information and privacy protection.

C. James: If the practice is not used, if the Premier doesn't feel it's important, will the Premier agree, then, that he's going to withdraw that act and practice?

Hon. G. Campbell: There is always an opportunity for recommendations to come forward from the opposition, either to the standing committee in the House or to the minister responsible. But again, let's be clear. These are initiatives that have been undertaken. It's part of the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act.

The opposition just doesn't want to hear that in British Columbia we are more open than virtually any other jurisdiction in country. That's the fact; that's the case. We are more accountable than any other. We have a very good and positive working relationship with the freedom-of-information and privacy commissioner. We're going to continue to build on that.

We're going to continue to take recommendations, and as we can improve the act, as we move forward, we'll do it. But we'll do it deliberately. We'll do it in consultation with all members of the House, as we've done in the past. As we do that, we'll continue to make significant progress and continue to lead the country.

C. James: In fact, recommendations had been made, including by the government's own committee, that had been completely ignored by this government. It's quite reasonable to actually ask these questions to the Premier, since he has ignored recommendations by his own committee, including ones as recently as 2004.

Let's take a look at the current practice. The Premier talks about being open and transparent. The Premier talks about the fact that they have not made changes that have had any impact on the current practice. Well, if we take a look at the current practice around FOI, it's very clear that the government never meets the 30-day time line that it's supposed to be meeting — mandated under law, in fact, to meet — and routinely comes back months and months and months later.

We see fees charged for information that's in the public interest that are impossible for individuals, certainly, and in fact many groups and organizations to be able to meet. The other practice we see routinely is that documents are heavily severed. For example, the recent FOI on child death reviews came back with over half of its pages completely blank.

What we also see is that the Premier's office is especially secretive when it comes to responding to routine requests that come through. I'll give a specific example here in the last short while. A request came forward for question period briefing notes that came back to us, as opposition, with completely blank documents, with simply the title at the top of the document that said "Facts about the B.C. Economy and Five Great Goals," with the five great goals completely blanked out.

Now, I don't know if the Premier thinks that that's secret information, but if he hasn't paid attention, it was in his throne speech. It's in every government document that's out there. It's on his website. But the Premier's office found the time, through freedom of information, to actually blank out those sections when the information came back. How does that fit with the Premier's example of openness and transparency?

Hon. G. Campbell: All the practices in the Premier's office are within the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act. If the opposition has a complaint about that or the information, they are totally able to go to the Privacy Commissioner and discuss that with the Privacy Commissioner, and he would make a ruling. What we've done as a government is strengthened that act, and we will continue to look for ways that we can strengthen it on behalf of the people of British Columbia.

C. James: I find it, again, extraordinary. It's a word I've used a lot in the last day with the kind of lack of responses we've received from the Premier on issues that he says are of critical importance to him, his leadership and his government. It shows what little regard he has for the importance of these issues.

[1600]

We see the kind of effort that the Premier's office has gone through on very small, what could be called unimportant, issues that have been requested from FOI, but let's take a look at very important issues that have also been requested. I think it's important. If the Premier's office would go that far to sever documents such as five great goals and economic indicators for British Columbia, what are they going to do with critical information that people are actually requesting?

The official opposition has also requested information on issues such as child death reviews, the ALR, the RAV line, Fair Pharmacare, the child care action plan. It's a long list, and at every turn we get exactly the same response: delays, blank documents, enormous fees or outright refusals to even respond. Is it the Premier's concern that his government and his office practices are actually increasing the public's view that the government has something to hide?

Hon. G. Campbell: We don't actually make any distinction between small issues and large issues that are raised in the Premier's office with regard to freedom-of-information and privacy requests. As I say to the Leader of the Opposition.... She's quick to cast aspersions. There's a process in place. If she feels that we're not carrying out our activities in a way that is in keeping with the act, then she should appeal those activities to the freedom-of-information and privacy commissioner.

All I can tell the Leader of the Opposition, again, is that we are completely compliant. The office does the best it can to respond in a timely fashion. It does do its due diligence, as it should do and as I would expect any ministry and any office in government to do with regard to freedom of information and privacy protection. The reason we have an independent officer of the Legislature who can sit and pass judgment on these things is so that if there are questions, they can be asked of an independent body. I think it's important for us to recognize that.

There will be estimates for Labour and Citizens' Services. This will be able to be canvassed completely at that time, and I would hope that the opposition critic will do just that.

C. James: While the Premier may be able to dismiss requests coming from the opposition and the press, it is other groups, as well, who are expressing concern. Hopefully, the Premier wouldn't ignore the kinds of concerns of other groups if he's writing the rest of us off.

If you take a look at the request that came in from the Western Canada Wilderness Committee.... They filed an information request regarding the government's new policy of putting resorts and lodges in B.C. parks. Some 2,400 pages of documents relative to the new policy of putting lodges in parks were identified, but after months of delay, the government flouted its own law and simply refused to release the information. The government was then ordered to release the documents by the Information and Privacy Commissioner.

It's a complete contradiction of what we just heard from the Premier. This was the government that was ordered by the freedom-of-information commissioner to actually release this information after they refused. On the day the government was ordered to release the information, the Liberals provided just 19 of those 2,400 pages — 19 pages of heavily censored e-mails and an unrelated report. I would like to ask the Premier if he thinks denying access to information on the government's park lodge strategy is an open and accountable way for his government to behave.

Hon. G. Campbell: I don't know the specifics of this case. I know there was one case where there was confusion between whether the freedom-of-information request should be made to the Minister of Environment or the Minister of Tourism, Sport and the Arts. We tried to respond to that.

I would just say to the Leader of the Opposition: I rest my case with regard to how the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act is established. Evidently, the organization didn't like the response. They appealed it to the freedom-of-information and privacy commissioner, and we responded as the Information and Privacy Commissioner had directed. That's exactly what the legislation encourages people to do if they don't feel they've been treated properly.

[1605]

C. James: The Premier, as he has done with most of the questions, is again ignoring the issue and the actual questions. A very specific question, which is around openness and transparency and the direction that his government has taken over the last year that has made it difficult for people to be able to access information: does the Premier think it's reasonable that the freedom-of-information commissioner has to order the government to release that information, rather than the government releasing it itself? Does that not contradict the statements the Premier has made about openness and transparency being critical for government?

Hon. G. Campbell: What I will say to the Leader of the Opposition is: this government acts fully in compliance with the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act. The Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act is there for two things. There is a balance. There's freedom of information, and there's privacy protection. It requires us to be diligent as we operate on requests that come to my office — or to any ministry, for that matter. When they're going to other ministries, if there are specific examples, then I would encourage the opposition critic to raise them with regard to Labour and Citizens' Services.

Again, there are responsibilities on both sides of this requirement. It's not just a question of sort of throwing out a net and hoping that you can get something. As the freedom-of-information commissioner himself will say, a focused request is a much easier request to respond to. It's the same for us; it's the same for others.

I would hope that we will continue.... We will continue; I won't hope that. We will continue to provide information to people in keeping with and compliant with the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act. That is our responsibility, and we will live up to that responsibility.

C. James: I find it sad that the Premier ignores advice from his own committee and advice from the independent officers who are there to provide advice to government about how to increase openness and transparency. Completely ignored by the Premier, ignored by government, is an opportunity to make the government more open and transparent.

I want to use another example for the Premier, in fact, of recommendations that have been ignored by government. The Chief Electoral Officer delivered his post-election report to the Legislature in April, entitled

Recommendations for Legislative Change, March 2006. He talks about the fact that in 1995, when the Election Act was changed, B.C. was a leader in Canada. But since then B.C. has been left behind, and he is calling for a review of election finance rules.

I'd like to quote from the electoral officer: "It may be appropriate to review all current election financing provisions in light of the national trends and shifting public expectations and social attitudes." I'd like to ask the Premier if he agrees with the recommendations of the Chief Electoral Officer that our election finance rules could be improved.

Hon. G. Campbell: My understanding is that the Chief Electoral Officer has tabled 62 recommendations for improvements to the Election Act. Clearly, those will all be considered by government. I think the Chief Electoral Officer.... I don't think this; I know the Chief Electoral Officer was very clear that there are some ramifications from the setting of an election date that require consideration by government. We will certainly take those into consideration.

It is important, I think, also, for us to make sure that we are doing everything we can to increase participation of British Columbians in the electoral process as we move ahead. We've watched as there's been a reduction in the turnout of people at elections. As we announced in the throne speech, we'd like to find ways together that we can increase those opportunities.

I think that the report has been placed as it should have been. We have a referendum that will be taking place on May 12, 2009, with regard to the STV system and whether people want that to go forward or not. There have been some strong recommendations in the report, and we look forward to reviewing them in the months ahead. Certainly, the decisions of government will be made prior to the next election.

C. James: I think there are a number of specifics within that report that the Premier and government could actually look at immediately to try and improve voter turnout, to try and improve the support for our political process and our democratic process, which would be a plus for all of us, because when people engage in the political process, it makes democracy stronger.

[1610]

Let's take a look at some of the examples which should be influencing B.C. that were raised by the electoral officer. He talks about trends across the country. He talks about bans on union and corporate donations — in Quebec in 1978, in Manitoba in 2001, and at the federal level most recently. They're different political groups, different governments, looking at some trends.

Manitoba and the federal government both have limits on third-party spending. There are limits on individual donations in Manitoba and federally. The federal government is bringing these in. The federal law passed by the Chrétien government in 2004 allowed \$1,000 corporate donations to associations, and the new

accountability act by the new federal government, in fact, will eliminate those as well.

Finally, we see the federal government, as I mentioned, banning union and corporate donations altogether. The Premier's position so far has been that he does not support a ban on union and corporate donations. My question to the Premier is: in light of those trends, in light of the recommendations by the Chief Electoral Officer, is it still the Premier's position?

Hon. G. Campbell: My position has not changed. I've been very clear. The calls that I've heard from British Columbians are not that we use their tax dollars to support political parties. I think there have been some significant challenges in terms of third-party advertisements both before and during an election, and that's something, certainly, that we would be willing to look at. I think that it's an important part of the legislative process.

There are other disadvantages that take place. Small parties get left behind. It's fine for us to feel in the House like we'll be fine with the public funding program that is in place, but it doesn't allow for innovation in the political process.

I think that third-party spending is important and that it should be reviewed on a regular basis. Those are things that we're going to look at. As I've said, we think these are significant issues. I would not necessarily follow the electoral practices of Quebec or Manitoba. Certainly, we'll look and see how those are working and see what we can learn from them.

I think it should be very clear that as a government we do not believe that taxpayers should be funding political parties. We think the people of British Columbia, the organizations of the province, should be totally allowed to do that. They should fully disclose what they're doing and how they're doing that. We think that's important.

I think it's important for us, over the long term, to look at how we can improve the system. We may be able to learn from other jurisdictions; we'll look at that. As I said, there are 62 separate recommendations that have been brought forward by the Chief Electoral Officer. We will look at those recommendations and act in a timely fashion so that they're in place prior to the 2009 election — should those changes be required.

C. James: Just so we're clear: will the Premier include a discussion around banning union and corporate donations as part of that discussion?

Hon. G. Campbell: I'm sure there will be a public discussion that will take place with regard to this. As I've said, the government will look at the 62 recommendations of the Chief Electoral Officer. We will consider those and take any representations we may have from the public to hear how they feel that we may be able to improve the elections law in British Columbia — from the opposition and from other parties as well.

C. James: In fact, there are different processes used across the country when it comes to banning union and

corporate donations — differences in provinces, differences with the federal government. Some use public funding; some don't. In fact, it is an issue that I believe should be on the table, and I think it's important for people to know the Premier's views. The Premier's been very clear, Madam Chair, that he does not support public funding of elections. My question to the Premier is: does he support a ban on union and corporate donations?

Hon. G. Campbell: I believe that banning donations actually undermines the principle of including people in the public process. I believe that anyone who donates should actually have to disclose that contribution. The real question here is.... The Leader of the Opposition suggests that we should somehow publicly fund political parties. The issue for me is: where would she take those dollars from?

I don't hear people calling for the public funding of political parties. There are clearly some people who have different ideas on how we may be able to reform this. I'm glad to hear from any of them. The Chief Electoral Officer's report is available for people to peruse. If they agree with it, they should let the government know. If they disagree with it, they should let the government know. If they have other ideas on how we can improve on those things, they should let the government know.

[1615]

We, as government, will make decisions on that. If it's required to make legislative changes, we will bring them to this House. There will be a full and open debate, if those legislative changes are required, and we'll hear different positions.

I recognize that the Leader of the Opposition has said this is her position. I respect that. I think we have a different position on this side of the House, but we're glad to hear from the public on these issues.

C. James: Again, through to the Premier, what will be the time lines for that review process? Is he going to actually ask the Chief Electoral Officer to review election spending, financing, the time for third-party spending and limits on third-party spending? If so, when? What will the time lines be for that?

Hon. G. Campbell: Over the next number of months we'll have a chance to review the 62 recommendations that are before government. When we decide what we're going to do with those recommendations, we will inform the public of what's taking place, and we'll look at engaging people in discussion.

In the meantime, it's not only government that can invite people to be part of a discussion. I welcome the opposition to do that, and I welcome community groups across the province to think about that and to talk about how they think they can improve not just participation in the electoral system but how we may fund it. All of those issues are open. Clearly, we would have to make sure that those decisions are made in time for the next election in 2009. If there are changes to be made, I'm sure they'll be made well prior to 2009.

C. James: The reason we're raising this is because, in fact, the opposition has talked to the public and has talked to communities. They have made it very clear that they believe it's important to bring forward the issue of campaign financing, third-party limits, the time that people will be allowed to spend during an election campaign and what that election campaign time period looks like.

The introduction of fixed election dates, as we know, Madam Chair, has made it a very different kind of election campaign. We believe you should actually look at expanding the time period that people have to report election spending, because of the election cycle with fixed election dates. It hasn't been reviewed since 1995.

I appreciate that the Premier thinks that people will get involved in this discussion, but I think they have a right to know what the time lines will be for the Premier. Has he committed? Did we hear him today commit to actually doing a process before the next election to review election financing, to review the time periods for election, third-party financing and what that looks like?

Hon. G. Campbell: I can candidly say that I have received no recommendations from any organization other than the Leader of the Opposition with regard to this. The Chief Electoral Officer has just submitted his report. The 62 recommendations will be reviewed by government. I welcome people's comments on it, and as I've said, if there are changes to be made, those changes will be made in plenty of time for the 2009 election. If we decide that there are changes to be made, we will make those changes in consultation with the Chief Electoral Officer to ensure they're in time for the 2009 election.

I think that's what people would expect us to do — to act deliberately and thoughtfully on this. That's what we intend to do. I recognize the opposition leader's position and her party's position. They are in a position where, if they feel there should be no donations, they could say no to the donations that they're receiving. If they have donations that they feel they shouldn't be taking, they can turn their backs on them and say: "No, we won't take them, thank you very much." Our party does that now. We have specific donations that we will not accept, and we say: "We won't take them." The opposition may do that as well.

C. James: I will turn the chair over to my colleague from Maple Ridge-Pitt Meadows, who is the critic for Intergovernmental Relations, to ask the Premier some questions around the relationship with the federal government.

Before I do, I just want to make some remarks about what the last number of hours has pointed out to British Columbians. I think it's very important that people recognize that the issues we have raised over the last six or seven hours with the Premier — the issues of openness and accountability and of health care, issues that are critically important to British Columbians — are issues that we heard not wanting to be asked

and that we heard the Premier trying to avoid having questions about. When we did get an opportunity to ask questions, we received very few answers.

[1620]

I think it's pointed out a real lack of regard for the process, a real lack of regard for the questions and a real lack of regard for issues that matter to people in this province. These are critically important issues to the people of British Columbia — issues that matter to them. I think that once again we've seen very few answers and very little respect for those issues.

I will turn over the chair to my colleague from Maple Ridge to ask some questions around Intergovernmental Relations.

M. Sather: Concerns with coalmining proposals in the Flathead region of British Columbia have surfaced. The Flathead Basin Commission is involved, and groups like the Flathead Coalition have expressed concerns about the provincial government's approach to managing this area. The secretary of the coalition said that the province is "taking a shotgun approach to industrializing one of the wildest places in North America."

There are a number of coalmining proposals in the Flathead, as well as gold and oil and gas exploration. Cline Mining Corp. is planning the Lodgepole Coal Mine. The Premier met with Governor Schweitzer of Montana regarding this issue. B.C. and Montana have agreed that Montana will participate in the environmental assessment process for Lodgepole.

The minister of intergovernmental affairs has said that B.C. has the necessary data, but Montana has expressed doubts and is suggesting more study will be needed, costing \$10 million to \$12 million. Senator Baucus of Montana is already seeking federal dollars, and the U.S. National Park Service has committed \$100,000.

Cline Mining says the permitting process is underway, and they don't see Montana's participation slowing it down. I want to ask the Premier: what is the status of the permitting process?

Hon. G. Campbell: I'm glad to try and find the exact status of that proposal at this point, but maybe I can just take the member through some of this process that we've been undertaking.

We have been actively engaged with Montana on issues like environmental cooperation and energy. I met with the Governor of Montana, Brian Schweitzer, in September of '05. I've asked the Minister of State for Intergovernmental Relations to work with him. The real issue that they raised was the whole question of resource development and environmental management of the transboundary Flathead watershed.

I followed up with a letter in February of '06 inviting Montana to participate in environmental assessment. Frankly, I wanted them to see, as they have recognized, that British Columbia's environmental assessment process is a very thorough and comprehensive one — the environmental assessment review of the proposed Lodgepole Coal Mine and a joint comprehensive review of existing environmental data.

On April 10 of this year the minister of state communicated directly with the Governor's office. He invited Montana representatives to come to British Columbia. The purpose of that meeting was to finalize an action plan on an MOU which was signed in 2003. Montana has responded positively to our letters. Their representatives are participating actively in the environmental assessment. It is very clear to us that it is an important matter for us to consider as we move ahead — in British Columbia as well as in Montana, as well as the cross-border impacts.

The potential impact of the proposed requirements that we have for passports and tourism is another thing that we've been talking about with Montana. We're both participating in PNWER.

The status of the permit.... Certainly, you can go to the Minister of Energy, Mines and Petroleum Resources, but I will try and obtain that answer for you as quickly as possible.

[1625]

M. Sather: Montana has the option of going to the International Joint Commission if they are dissatisfied with the process. I wanted to ask the Premier: what's his sense of how long the two parties, British Columbia and Montana, have in current negotiations before Montana would be likely to seek the actions of the International Joint Commission?

Hon. G. Campbell: I'll tell the member opposite that since I had a chance to meet with the Governor, the minister of state has been working with the Governor's office. Although they may want to go to the International Joint Commission, I don't think that is the route we would go. We certainly are not in favour of that. We've been clear that we're not in favour of that. We believe that we can work on this collaboratively, so that both the people in Montana and the people in British Columbia know we're managing this in an environmentally sensible and sustainable manner.

M. Sather: The Minister of Energy and Mines concluded that the Sage and Cabin Creek open-pit mines, which were also mines of Cline Corp., would have violated the Boundary Waters Treaty when he cancelled the mines in 2004. Would the Lodgepole mine not do the same?

Hon. G. Campbell: Sorry. I'm not in a position where I can answer that with any confidence. Obviously, if there is a contravention of the treaty, then the mine would not go ahead. That's the whole purpose of having these processes in place. The Minister of Energy, Mines and Petroleum Resources acted in 2004 with regard to that to uphold the treaty. We will continue to do that.

What we're working on with Montana at this point is putting in place some baseline data which both jurisdictions recognize as being credible so that we can make these decisions on the basis of both our environmental assessment process, which is frankly very thor-

ough compared to what many other jurisdictions have got — certainly compared to what they often have in Montana.

We are taking a proactive approach with regard to this in working with Montana. We're saying: "What are the things that you're concerned about? How can we work with you?" We're saying the same things in the East Kootenays region to the people there. "What are the concerns? How would you like to respond to it?"

The Minister of State for Mining as well as the Minister of State for Intergovernmental Relations have been working on this with the communities in Montana. The framework for negotiating our differences is going to be put in place as part of the action plan. We're sharing information. We're improving data. There's no question that there is some room for improvement of data, so we are working on that. The member opposite mentioned that Senator Baucus, the Montana Senator, was looking for some federal funds from them to help develop more information on their side of the border.

Those are all positive steps which have really been engendered by the Governor coming and visiting with us, and us saying, as with Washington State, that we want to do the best we can to coordinate, to collaborate, to recognize that the environment does not pay any attention to man-made borders — to have sustainable and manageable activities that take place in the long term.

There will be times when we disagree. Our goal is to try and find a dispute resolution mechanism or framework as part of the agreement that we think will allow us to get on with the activities in the Flathead that meet the needs of British Columbians as well as the needs of Montanans.

M. Sather: I am mindful of an earlier response by the Premier, but I will ask him another question along the same lines about another mine.

There is a second nearby coalmine, which would be a thermal-coal-for-power-plant-generation proposal by Western Canadian Coal. This also has Montana concerned. How does this proposal compare with Lodgepole, and what effect would it have on the negotiations that are going on?

Hon. G. Campbell: I would simply invite the member to sit down with the minister and present some of those questions and go through them with him.

It's very difficult to compare one situation to another. That's why we have a comprehensive environmental assessment process. I have just learned that the Cline mine is actually in the preapplication phase of the environmental assessment process. Montana is being included in the discussions with regard to that.

When a mine comes forward, any significant resource development opportunity would go through the environmental assessment office before it would be granted a permit.

[1630]

M. Sather: The Dominion coal lands at the north end of the Flathead are owned by the federal govern-

ment. The government of British Columbia has an interest in acquiring those lands for resource development.

The Martin government had expressed interest in expansion of Waterton National Park into the Flathead area in exchange for transfer of those lands. But now local Conservative MP Jim Abbott, in referring to park expansion, said: "It's time to put this idea on the shelf or in whatever suitable repository is available."

Is the park expansion idea now dead as long as the Harper government is in power?

[D. Hayer in the chair.]

Hon. G. Campbell: First, national parks are determined by the federal government. They're normally determined by the federal government in concert with a province. Certainly, that's been our experience so far when we established the national park in the Gulf Islands in the last few years.

I can't tell you what the status from the federal government's perspective is. You just told me what Jim Abbott's status is.

In terms of the Dominion coal block, we have said that we would like the return of that block of lands back to the province. We see no connection between the two. So we will continue to work to have the return of the lands to the province, but we don't see that as a connection with the national park idea. That's something that would have to be determined by the national government.

M. Sather: Does this government favour the expansion proposal for Waterton National Park?

Hon. G. Campbell: It has not been at the top of our agenda, certainly, to date. Through a lot of hard work with local communities and community groups in that area, we have established a sustainable resource management plan. Often the national park designation was used as a way of keeping things from taking place, but we are looking for integrated uses.

We understand there have been some challenges with that land — for example, with all-terrain vehicles and how those work. We think the way to manage that properly is through the sustainable resource management plan, through open discussions with local community groups who have some concern.

We know there are some challenges in terms of wildlife in the area. We're looking at how we can assure that those things are protected.

So the national park was not an idea that we were pursuing. We thought we could deal with all of the issues in front of us with the sustainable resource management plan.

[1635]

M. Sather: I think that was a no.

I'll move on to another subject, the proposed Alaska Highway pipeline. This is a project that's been in the making, if you will, for a long time. I actually had some

involvement back in the mid-'70s in flying the proposed route in northern British Columbia to do wildlife surveys.

I wanted to first ask the Premier if the proposed route through British Columbia is the same route as what was established back in the '70s, roughly following the Alaska Highway and crossing the border at Boundary Lake near Dawson Creek.

Hon. G. Campbell: I don't want to pretend to the member that I know the exact route. If you've flown the route, you probably have a better idea of what the route would be.

We have said to the federal government that we would certainly allow the assessment of the route to take place. That would clearly be a regulated federal issue. We've said quite clearly to Alaska that should that proposal be brought forward, we would have to deal with first nations in British Columbia. As we looked at that, we would have a number of issues that we'd have to deal with.

There have been a couple of discussions that we've had. I've had a couple of discussions with the new Governor of Alaska as well as with the previous Governor of Alaska. The Western Premiers Conference often will hear from the Premier of the Yukon Territory talking about the potential for that line. But there is a long, long way between talk and actually delivering it.

There are opportunities there perhaps. Certainly before any final commitment was made on that, it would have to go through all of our environmental assessment processes. It would have to go through all our consultation processes with first nations along the route. We would want to be sure that there were benefits for British Columbia as well as for the people of Alaska and the Yukon.

M. Sather: The Premier mentioned some of the meetings and discussions that have taken place. I understand that the Minister of Intergovernmental Relations met with Governor Murkowski of Alaska, Premier Fentie of the Yukon and Premier Klein of Alberta in March of this year to discuss issues of mutual importance to the four governments in construction of this massive \$20 billion project for bringing natural gas from Prudhoe Bay in Alaska down the Alaska Highway into the United States. That was apparently one of the main subjects discussed.

I understand the process is early on, but there are discussions underway. What would be the approximate dollar figure of this mammoth project for the British Columbia portion?

Hon. G. Campbell: There are various proposals, but each contemplates a value for the full pipeline of between \$14 billion and \$20 billion, as the member opposite suggested. Clearly, there would be substantial construction dollars involved in that. Until we actually know what the proposal is and how it might be brought to fruition, I can't answer the question of what the benefits to British Columbia would be.

There may be opportunities to pull off some of the positive economic benefits into areas like the Peace River area — the north Peace or the south Peace. I can't answer that at this point. It is a major, major project. It is of major importance to the Governor of Alaska and the government of Alaska. It's of major importance to the Yukon.

We've encouraged the federal government to work with those jurisdictions as they look at that, but we've been very clear that as we work to try and make sure that carries forward in a constructive way, it would have to go through all of the processes we've put in place.

I would again suggest that in terms of the pipeline-specific issues, the Minister of Energy and Mines would be a good person to talk to about that. In terms of the processes that have been undertaken, the member opposite is correct. We have had a number of meetings. I personally had a meeting with the Governor and the Premiers in the past.

[1640]

John van Dongen.... Sorry. The Minister of State for Intergovernmental Relations — the man who has no name — will actually carry on and work with Alaska, Yukon and the government of Canada in seeing what processes we can put in place and how we can facilitate the arrival at a conclusion of the discussions.

M. Sather: I recognize that the Premier is not an expert in this area and that it isn't his particular portfolio, but I must say that I did let the Premier's office know I was going to be asking this question, so I had hoped he would have a few more answers.

The Premier had mentioned that before any such proposal would go forward, there would have to be discussions with first nations. Yet there is quite a bit of development taking place with regard to this proposal. In February of this year the Governor of Alaska announced a tentative deal with the producers of the gas — ConocoPhillips, British Petroleum and ExxonMobil. TransCanada Pipelines was given a provisional approval by Alaska for a right-of-way across Alaska lands.

The process is underway, so I was wondering if the Premier and the province have had any discussions at all with first nations about this proposal.

Hon. G. Campbell: I believe that first nations are aware of the project. They are also aware of the fact that any environmental assessment would have a specific component that related directly to first nations in the area. I have had no entreaties from first nations; I've had no inquiries from first nations with regard to this.

I think the member opposite is correct. In October, Alaska and ConocoPhillips reached an agreement on the fiscal terms related to the Alaska gas producers project. On February 21, Alaska announced it had reached an agreement for the fiscal contract with ExxonMobil and BP. That is simply the beginning of it. They couldn't even get started if they didn't have a contract in place.

They have not been shy about letting us know that they have a plan they would like to move forward with. We have not been shy about saying there's a lot of work that's got to be done on that before we get started, whether it's the environmental assessments or whether it's the cross-border issues that the federal government will have to carry out. We have encouraged the federal government to participate in that, to lay out the program that's necessary, which is under their jurisdiction, and to do that in concert with Yukon Territory, Alberta and British Columbia.

M. Sather: My last question on this subject. There has been a lot of effort, as the Premier will know, to open up the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge to oil and gas development. That refuge is right next door to the Prudhoe Bay gas deposit.

My question is: would British Columbia support this pipeline carrying gas from the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge?

Hon. G. Campbell: We have not taken a position on that. If there was going to be a position taken on that, I assume it would be taken by the federal government, should they decide to do that. I understand there's a major debate in the United States with regard to that. I think the elected government of Alaska has made its decisions on what they want to do.

My concerns in this are with regard to the province of British Columbia. We have not chosen between the Mackenzie Valley pipeline and the Alaska pipeline. We have said consistently that we believe those two jurisdictions will make their own choices.

[1645]

We have encouraged Canada to provide for the support to the Mackenzie Valley pipeline that's necessary to try and get it on. I believe they're in the middle of that process right now. We have encouraged Canada to look fully at the environmental impacts that this may have and to work with our partners in the Yukon, Alberta and Alaska in analyzing that.

As I mentioned earlier, it would be a national initiative that's undertaken. When it crosses the borders of British Columbia, it clearly would be an environmental assessment review or analysis that would have to be done by the province. That's what we would be concerned with.

The second part of that, which I think is critical, is that if it crosses the province, we'd want to be sure that our first nations and communities were included in the discussions about the potential impacts — both positive and negative — that a pipeline may have. We've been very clear with Alaska and the other partners that it's the position we would take.

I believe that the pipeline is a significant time off, a significant period off. It's something they would like to try and do in Alaska. They may be able to do it with substantial subsidies from the national government of the United States, but I don't know the answers to that at this point either. I don't believe the Minister of Energy and Mines would, in that particular regard, either.

M. Sather: I want to now move on to an area of great interest and concern to British Columbians, having to do with our relationship with other countries and particularly the United States. It's the issue of foreign ownership. Today foreign ownership is probably at the highest level it's ever been in Canada, and the stats do not even consider majority foreign-owned subsidiaries like Canadian National and Air Canada. Since Brian Mulroney scrapped the Foreign Investment Review Agency, 11,500 companies have been taken over by non-resident-controlled corporations.

Some 97 percent of this money was for takeovers, and only 3 percent was actually for new investment. Not one of those takeovers was denied by investment Canada, so their track record is 100-percent approval. To make matters worse, most of these takeovers have been financed by our own banks.

Loss of sovereignty is a big concern to Canadians and to British Columbians. There are other problems with foreign ownership. Foreign firms import much of their goods and services from their parent company, with a loss of jobs and economic activity in British Columbia. Foreign corporations transfer profits out of Canada and B.C., and we lose the tax revenue.

American investment in Canada is \$64 billion greater than Canadian investment in the United States. Dozens of major sectors of the Canadian economy are now heavily or majority foreign-owned, while not one major sector in the U.S. is majority foreign-owned.

Over half of the manufacturing sector in Canada is foreign-owned. No other major industrialized country has a level of foreign ownership of its manufacturing sector even a third as high as Canada.

This is not good for British Columbia. Would the Premier agree that we should approach the federal government to restrict foreign takeovers of companies in British Columbia?

Hon. G. Campbell: The short answer to the member's question is no. We actually are a government that believes in encouraging investment. Investment is what creates jobs in the province. Jobs in the province are what create the resources and the fuel for the public services that are so critical in the province.

We have British Columbia companies that are investing in the United States, Europe, Japan, China and India. That's what we want to encourage. We have to recognize that as a small open trading economy, we have to encourage investments.

Just to give the member an idea.... You know, there are very few people that would say we hadn't benefited from the investment of Weyerhaeuser in British Columbia. There are literally thousands of jobs that have been created by Weyerhaeuser's operations here. There are very few British Columbians who aren't pleased that West Fraser has invested in the United States, because they believe there's benefits to them in doing that.

[1650]

I think we have to recognize that as a government, we are going to encourage investment. We are going to

try and create a package of taxes and regulatory concerns that keeps investments in British Columbia. For example, in the budget in 2005 we introduced intellectual property protection, basically, so that our technology industries would stay here. We're investing in the Great Northern Way digital media centre so we can keep that critical mass right here in British Columbia. There have been investments from both the federal government and the provincial government in organizations like Ballard Power so we can have alternative energy building its opportunities here and creating opportunities for British Columbians and investment opportunities in other parts of world.

I don't concur that we should be stopping it. It's actually obviously something the federal government would have to deal with. I was a supporter of NAFTA; I remain a supporter of NAFTA. I think free trade and open trade are best for the province. I think they're best for the workers of British Columbia. I think they're best for the communities of British Columbia.

We just had a pulp mill that was opened in Port Alice. We have an awful lot of foreign investors that have created jobs. I don't know if the member opposite was in Port Alice when that opened, but I can tell you there was a celebration. There was a celebration that people had the jobs and had the opportunities and had the stability that they were looking for.

Any company that does come and locate in British Columbia will be operating under B.C. law, under B.C. regulations, under B.C. tax codes, and they will help us build an even stronger and more prosperous province.

M. Sather: The Premier says that he wants to keep investment in Canada, but the facts show that it's not working — that we're simply being taken over by foreign ownership. That's the reality of it.

There was no suggestion that we stop foreign ownership or investment, but the question was whether we might not act to limit it. Such was the case before this government removed those restrictions — when they came to power, and it resulted in more foreign takeovers such as Kinder Morgan taking over Terasen, as we discussed at length last fall.

When China National Offshore Oil Corp. tried to take over Unocal in the United States, the American government blocked it. It was a great free trading country. It doesn't sound like this Premier would favour that approach. How much of British Columbia is the Premier willing to sell to foreign investors?

Hon. G. Campbell: Let's start with the assumption that investment isn't working in B.C. Investment is working in British Columbia. British Columbia companies are investing in British Columbia. British Columbia companies are expanding in British Columbia. Small business confidence in this province is at a record high.

Hon. B. Penner: Unemployment.

Hon. G. Campbell: Unemployment is at a record low. Youth employment is at a record high. Business incorporations are up 10 percent. We have the lowest insolvency rate in Canada. Investment growth and intentions — we're leading Canada with regard to that, literally billions and billions of dollars.

I believe an open economy that encourages competition, which encourages us and creates a level playing field for British Columbia and Canadian companies and enterprises, is actually doing a very good job for the people of British Columbia in securing not just opportunities for today but opportunities for tomorrow.

The interesting thing for me is that I think this is actually what people fear about the opposition. They fear this kind of intrusion and this kind of roadblock to investment. There's no secret why investment started to dry up in British Columbia in the '90s. We are very clear and very open about this. This side of the House wants investment and encourages investment, international trade and international investment from Canadian companies — offshore and vice versa — because we believe that's how you build a future and a foundation for prosperity.

[1655]

M. Sather: The Premier says that the people of British Columbia have fears about our side of the House. What the people of British Columbia have fears about with the government side is that there is no control whatsoever. There appears to be none, and no concern about how much foreign investment or how much foreign control of our province we have.

Most British Columbians do see this, rightly, as an issue of sovereignty. It's our country. It's our province, and we want to have some control over our own destiny, but as long as we're going to become and remain hewers of wood and drawers of water for foreign corporations, which the Premier is very happy to have.... He invites them to this province in all kinds of guises, whether it's privatization of health care, whether it's Hydro — any number of areas. It's of no concern whatsoever to the Premier how much foreign investment there is. He's made that very clear.

But it's not true that British Columbians have no concern about it, because they do. They really do. It's about pride in one's country and about pride in one's province. One wants to see, I want to see, we want to see — and, I would think, members on that side of the House would like to see — that we are and we remain in some control over our own province. That's not happening, unfortunately, with this government.

I want to say a little bit more about another issue which is related, and that's the issue of so-called deep integration with the United States. Corporate leaders in Canada are looking at deep integration with the United States in some sort of NAFTA plus-type arrangement.

This integration and harmonization policy that is being pursued by our federal government is not just about synchronizing the labelling of orange juice in Canada and the United States, as was suggested in a recent editorial I read in the *Vancouver Sun*. It's not, as

that paper says — or perhaps the Premier agrees — some "tyranny of small differences." It's far, far more significant than that.

Some of the big ideas advocated by some of the corporate world may be on the table with the election of the Harper government. Mr. Harper has promoted and presumably still promotes "continental economic and security integration" with the United States. Canada will lose the right to set our own labour, environmental and security standards under this arrangement.

One of these arrangements is a continental so-called security perimeter including missile defence. I'd like to ask the Premier if he's in favour of that policy.

Hon. G. Campbell: I want to start with the comments the member made a little bit earlier. What our government inherited was a province where people were feeling pretty down. In fact, I'd refer him to the StatsCan report that just came out, which called the 1990s the lost decade. It was exactly because of that kind of rhetoric.

The fact of the matter is that we've moved forward. We have had one of the fastest growing economies in the country. We've created almost 300,000 new jobs. We have more women in the workforce than ever in the history of the province. We have the highest number of youth in the workforce that we've ever had in the history of British Columbia. We have one of the lowest levels of unemployment that we've ever seen in the province.

All of those issues are the result of the fact that we have recognized that we're a small, open, trading economy. We also have confidence in British Columbia businesses.

The member opposite talks about hewers of wood and drawers of water. Well, let me be really clear about this. I'm proud of the forest industry. I'm proud of everybody that's in the forest industry. I'm proud of the products that they send. I'm proud of the fact that British Columbia is the largest softwood exporter in the world.

[S. Hawkins in the chair.]

I also think it's important for us to recognize, as we look to the future, that people are looking for us to diversify our economy. We've done that in a number of areas.

[1700]

The member opposite may not be aware of this, but Angiotech, QLT.... Those biotech companies are some of the most successful biotech companies in the world. We're creating a critical mass of biotech here, which builds on our forestry industry; our mining industry, which has been restored after ten years of neglect; an energy industry, which is thriving and booming; and an agriculture industry, which is starting to find new niche markets where they're recognized around the world for the quality of their produce. All of those things are about diversifying the economy.

We have to open our economy to trade. We sit today as Canada's only Pacific province. We're in the Asia-Pacific. Talk to the people in Prince Rupert about

whether they think we should be encouraging foreign investment. There are investors from China who are coming to Prince Rupert and saying that they think they may be able to help.

Talk to the people in other parts of the province who are encouraging investors from Japan, from Korea and from India to invest in British Columbia, because we are the doorstep to their future. We see ourselves as opening opportunities for them throughout North America. As we build our transportation infrastructure, we look at it as an opportunity for North American products to be sent to those Asia-Pacific markets. Opening up those markets, viewing the Asia-Pacific as an opportunity, viewing an open economy as a huge social, cultural and economic opportunity for us is where we should be taking Canada, and where we intend to take Canada.

M. Sather: Well, the fact of the matter is that what's happening with the corporate policies that this government is so fond of is that the gap between the haves and have-nots is ever-widening. I don't know whether that's a concern to the Premier or not, but it should be. It should be, because it's a real problem.

I have to correct one thing the Premier said earlier today. This has been repeated before. The Premier said that when they took over government, when this government came into power in 2001, they inherited a \$4.5 billion deficit. He knows that's incorrect, hon. Chair. In fact, there were back-to-back surplus budgets of the previous government that this government inherited. That's the truth. It's the clear truth.

Another idea that's part and parcel of the deep integration policy with the United States is a common trade policy and monetary union. Does the Premier favour those policies?

Hon. G. Campbell: Let me go back and talk about the security perimeter. I think it is important for us to be on the record, as we have been in favour of a security perimeter for Canada. The reason we're in favour of a security perimeter is that we believe it in no way takes away from our sovereignty, but it does allow us to continue the free flow of trades, goods and people across the border. I'm sure the member opposite is aware that we are right now confronting the whole issue of passport identification for the flow of Americans north to Canada and Canadians south to the United States and how we may be able to mitigate the challenges that will create for our tourism industry.

We're in a very fortunate position that we are neighbours to the United States. We are their best friends. We are their largest beneficiaries and their largest trading partners. We believe we can work with them, in concert. We believe we can do that without losing any kind of sovereignty, and we believe that as we do that, we will actually improve on the quality of life for Canadians, and for British Columbians, particularly. So we will continue to pursue that policy.

I think it's clear that British Columbians are benefiting from our growing economy. Families are benefiting

from our growing economy. Our growing economy has allowed us to cut taxes to zero for people who earn \$15,000 a year or less. Our growing economy has allowed us to say to British Columbians who earn \$80,000 or less: "You pay the lowest level of personal income taxes of any jurisdiction in the country." Those are all important.

[1705]

Our growing economy has allowed us to invest \$3.5 billion more in health care. Our growing economy has allowed us to invest billions more dollars in education to provide 25,000 additional educational seats across the province so that our young people can take advantage of the future they want to create for themselves and shape that. That's what a growing economy has done.

A security perimeter may well, indeed, help us achieve those goals. An open economy certainly helps us achieve those goals. The thrust we're making towards the Asia-Pacific, towards China, Korea, Japan and India, helps us achieve those goals. Recapturing our markets in Europe helps us achieve those goals. Making sure we are an open economy, where Canadian companies can invest in the United States and take advantage of expanding opportunities there, helps us achieve those goals as well.

That's what we think is important as we move ahead. Our vision for our province is a province that is open — open to opportunity, to diversity, to investment, to job creation, to learning, to creativity and open to the future that lies before us.

M. Sather: The Premier didn't answer my question. I was particularly interested in his view around monetary union with the United States.

The subject that the Premier did speak about was the security perimeter, having a common security perimeter around North America, which would involve a lot of harmonization of regulations, border procedures and so on with the United States. Guess whose regulations are going to take precedence. Certainly not this country and certainly not this province. I think the Premier probably knows that.

A third idea of the deep integration idea is a continental energy and resources pact with the United States. I would like to ask if the Premier favours that idea.

Hon. G. Campbell: I'm having a great deal of difficulty here. I have no idea where these ideas are coming from.

Interjections.

The Chair: Order, members.

Hon. G. Campbell: I haven't heard anybody in British Columbia raise those as issues. I haven't heard anyone at the federal level raise those issues. The research department's either working overtime on.... Well, I don't know what they're doing over there.

Let me say this. I haven't heard anyone suggest that we unite our currency. That would be a federal deci-

sion, not a provincial decision. I can tell you this. In British Columbia we're going to build our own future working with Canada. I guess the principle that I would work on is one of mutual benefit. If we can find mutual benefits, we should pursue something. If we can't, we won't. It's pretty simple.

We thought there was a mutual benefit in working with Alberta, in looking at eliminating regulation that was causing trouble, expanding the flow of people back and forth across the border so they could do things. All of those things are important, but they were done on the basis of mutual benefit. If there isn't a mutual benefit, why would we do it? Why would we approve of it?

There are things that we're responsible for provincially. There are things that the federal government is responsible for, and the federal government will decide that. There will be debates with regard to that. We may well be asked to be included in that debate.

I haven't heard anyone raise these issues, so it's hard for me.... I frankly think that my major criteria for all these things is: is it best for British Columbia? If it's best for British Columbia, we'll do it; if it's not good for British Columbia, we will not do it.

M. Sather: Maybe the Premier should have a chat with the Canadian Council of Chief Executives. I would think he would have spoken to some of those individuals. These are certainly ideas that are freely circulated in the corporate world.

I wanted to switch to NAFTA, a subject that the Premier said he is a great supporter of. Since the free trade deals, almost all of the income gains have gone to the business elite and corporate profits, so it's no wonder they support it so strongly. Employee wages have stagnated, and new jobs on average are less secure and lower-paying.

When the C.D. Howe Institute and others talk about the benefits of further economic integration between Canada and the U.S., they're talking in large part about the disproportionate benefits to corporations and those that run them.

[1710]

[J. Nuraney in the chair.]

We have seen how the United States manages their own interests — for example, with the softwood deal and the problems we've been having there. It is not over yet, apparently. The energy provisions of NAFTA lock us into a North American energy future ruled by the United States. The investor-rights provisions of NAFTA make privatization of public services, like our health care, a one-way street of growing U.S. corporate control. This is against the backdrop at the federal level.

Now Prime Minister Stephen Harper said in 1997: "It's past time the feds scrapped the Canada Health Act." We need to tell the United States that we want to renegotiate this deal. What we have is not working for British Columbians....

The Chair: Member.

M. Sather: Yes, hon. Chair?

The Chair: Can I ask you to be relevant to what we are discussing here today, please.

M. Sather: Certainly, hon. Chair. I would hope the question is relevant to this government and to the Premier, so I will ask the question. I would like to ask the Premier, despite his earlier comments, if he would be open to a public review of NAFTA and to opening up dialogue with the federal government over this important issue?

Hon. G. Campbell: I think that if the member opposite and his leader and their party want to have an open review of NAFTA, they should carry it on. Welcome to public life. Go out and engage people in the debate.

NAFTA has been clearly a benefit to Canada, to Canadians, to their jobs and to the economy, in every part of the country. Maybe the NDP's position is to stop NAFTA. I would recommend.... Frankly, I will gladly get the member opposite the phone number of the leader of the federal NDP so he can contact him directly and give him advice on these foreign affairs issues.

From our perspective, we've been very clear about what we're trying to do. We're trying to have a province with an open economy, a province that encourages investment and a province that encourages jobs. So far, over the last five or six years, we've done pretty well. Is any man- or human-made vehicle perfect? Probably not. NAFTA, on balance, has been hugely beneficial to Canada and to our businesses.

If the NDP's position is, "Let's stop NAFTA," then they should say it. If they say, "We don't like NAFTA much; we'd like to change it," they should say it. They don't, of course. They should say it if they really believe it. That's what frightens people about the opposition. People say: "Where do these things come from?"

I do talk with business executives across the country. I talk with business executives in British Columbia, and I also talk with community leaders in British Columbia. I talk with community groups in British Columbia and citizens on the street. I talk with health care providers. I talk with teachers. Do you know what they say? They're feeling a lot better about the province. They feel optimistic. They think we're going somewhere. They know we are leading again, and they're proud to be part of British Columbia and moving on.

M. Sather: I wanted to ask the Premier some questions about another proposed project, a large project, this being the Alaska-Canada railway. There are discussions underway, particularly between Alaska and the Yukon, about a railway from Alaska through the Yukon and British Columbia. Initial capital costs are estimated between \$3.6 billion and \$4.1 billion, so it's a very large project, and this is over four years. In the

discussions the Premier has had on this issue, should this be built, what is the most likely route that would be pursued? Would it be along the Alaska Highway or along the Stewart-Cassiar Highway?

[1715]

Hon. G. Campbell: The Alaska rail link has not been a file that we have been pursuing in the government specifically with regard to the transportation infrastructure. However, having said that, I have met with Governor Murkowski, and the Minister of State for Intergovernmental Relations has met with them. British Columbia is participating in a working group that's putting together a feasibility study.

The member opposite is correct. This is simply an idea that has been brought forward by Alaska and the Yukon. It's an idea that we are trying to participate with them in. I believe there are two potential routes. That's one of the things that will be part of the feasibility study. We want to see the results of that study — particularly if it's financially viable, because I think there are some real questions about that. What are the economic benefits to British Columbia? There may well be questions about that. How have first nations been included and what would be the consultative process that would take place with regard to them? There would be a lot of discussion about that. What are the environmental impacts?

Those are all part of the first-level feasibility that's taking place. Decisions about going ahead with the rail link and about its route will be based on its financial viability. If it doesn't go ahead.... We're certainly not going to be subsidizing it. We would not encourage the federal government to subsidize it. I doubt that the Yukon government would have any dollars to subsidize it.

The issue for us is: does this thing make any sense? The government of Canada, again, is the governing body that will take the lead role if the project progresses beyond a study. Certainly, if there is a proposed link that crosses provincial and international boundaries, it would be required to take the lead role. So we are in the process of gathering information, seeing if it's an idea that goes beyond sort of a quick off-the-top-of-your-head idea. Is there any opportunity for it to go ahead? If there is, what are the costs? What are the benefits to British Columbians? How are first nations included? That's all part of what would be included in any study before a final decision was made on whether we would even start thinking about the major investments that would be required to make that rail link go from a dream to reality.

It may well be an idea very similar to the bridge from the mainland to Vancouver Island. It's something that looks really simple on a piece of paper — it's just this far. It's just literally billions of dollars and would cost a thousand dollars in tolls just to give you even a chance at making it break even. I have no idea what the situation is, what the feasibility is. We've said to Alaska we're willing to work with them and provide them with information. We said to the federal government

that they should be taking the lead, and that's what we would expect.

M. Sather: As the Premier acknowledged, there have been quite a few discussions about this issue, and I'm sure the various routes would have been discussed. I would like to ask the Premier: if the Stewart-Cassiar route were to be chosen — and there have been some discussions, as I understand it, that that is the preferred route — would they be likely to use the old BCR railway route, the railbed from the Dease Lake area south?

Hon. G. Campbell: Again, I can say to the member opposite: I don't know the details of the plan that has been put in place. I understood we would be discussing this briefly. I've told the member about the process that is underway.

The route, the alignment, the rail line — all of those things would be part of the feasibility study. Frankly, we're not through the first part of the feasibility study, let alone getting to the second part of it. If there is a railbed there that's available, they may well want to use that. They may well think that is an advisable use. Again, it would have to go through the full processes that I was discussing earlier.

[1720]

M. Sather: A report for the Yukon government by Charles River Associates, which I expect the Premier maybe is familiar with, notes that this railway would enhance support of missile defence interceptor silos being built at Fort Greeley, Alaska, and missile-tracking radar on Shemya, one of the Aleutian Islands. Does the Premier support this rationale for the railroad?

Hon. G. Campbell: I think I outlined what our concerns would be. Ours would be the financial viability of the rail link, its economic benefits for British Columbians, including first nations, and its environmental impacts.

I have not brought myself up to speed with regard to national defence policy nor with regard to American defence policy, nor would it be my task to do that. I can tell you that if there's a rail line, it will be used. If there's not a rail line.... We're not even close to there yet.

I think my answer speaks for itself. If the member opposite would like a more detailed review of all of the proposals that are being put in front of the feasibility study committee, I would be glad to assure that that can take place.

I haven't heard about Mr. Rivers' report or the River Associates report. I haven't heard about its conclusions. I haven't heard about its rationale. Our rationale is if it makes sense for British Columbia, if it's environmentally sensible, if first nations are included, if there are economic benefits, then we may well look at it going ahead.

We would leave it to the federal government to determine national defence policy, and as I mentioned earlier, we'll leave it to the federal government to de-

termine whether or not this even has legs to carry it forward.

M. Sather: I'll take the high road here, unlike the members opposite, and not make any comments about research.

The Council of the Federation transportation news release in December of last year — the document called *Looking to the Future: A Plan for Investing in Canada's Transportation System* — calls for the federal government to make substantial infrastructure investments.

[S. Hawkins in the chair.]

The Prime Minister says they will match the former government's commitment of \$600 million for the Gateway project. A news report in March of this year said that the province is looking for another \$1.9 billion, however, from the federal government to match provincial commitments in infrastructure. To the Premier: what further commitments, if any, have been made by the federal government?

Hon. G. Campbell: The Council of the Federation laid out a strategy for transportation investment across the country which actually said to the federal government: you don't have to send us the resources, but if you could complement the investments we are making to improve the transportation system in the country, that would be important.

We felt, as Premiers, it was a critical component of productivity and it was a critical component in our competitive marketplace.

The first step was taken — which we have always called a down payment — of \$590 million for the Pacific gateway project, it was called specifically. The member opposite's own riding is going to benefit from some of that sharing from the federal government as we create a seven-lane Pitt River Bridge that I think will alleviate an awful lot of challenges for people in that part of the province. The Mary Hill bypass will be straightened away. All of those things are very important. That's part of the project.

In this budget the federal government reiterated its commitment to the down payment dollars. We have told them that our first priority is the South Fraser perimeter road. It is a critical component of delivering goods from Canada out to the Pacific and from the Pacific into Canada. We expect that to go forward.

The investments that I believe we need over the long term in the Pacific gateway far exceed \$590 million. I have not received commitments for those investments as yet, but we are pursuing them. To put it in context for the member opposite, when the federal government invested in the St. Lawrence Seaway it had an equivalent cost of about \$3.5 billion. British Columbians helped pay for that. We think that same kind of investment should be used to open up the Pacific opportunity through Prince Rupert, Port Alberni, Vancouver — through British Columbia's whole network of ports that can provide substantial, I think, competi-

tive advantage to us. Literally billions of dollars of economic growth would be expected in British Columbia and in Canada.

[1725]

As we think of the Pacific gateway in Canada, we think of opportunities.... For example, the small town of Ashcroft in the interior of British Columbia has said they'd like to look at creating an inland port there. In Kamloops they're saying the same thing.

We have this opportunity in Prince George with the expansion of the airport, with the improvements to the CN rail lines, to create a brand-new Pacific inland port that will increase the flow of goods and services and economic activity beyond anything we have imagined in the past.

We're saying to the federal government: "This is Canada's future." It happens that there's only one Pacific province in the country — British Columbia. But this is Canada's future. The whole world is looking to the Pacific economies — to China, to India, to Korea, to Japan, to the ASEAN countries. We are Canada's front door to the Pacific.

We have an enormous opportunity here, but we need the cooperation and the commitment of the federal government. I know that in their federal budget, there were commitments to increasing infrastructure investments. That's good for us.

We see real opportunities not just in opening the Kicking Horse Canyon and continuing on with that project. We see opportunities in Highway 97. We see opportunities in Highway 3.

There are real opportunities for us to use federal dollars to complement our objectives and our initiatives in British Columbia, because it is an example of where there is an overlap. There are mutual benefits. There is a huge benefit for Canada, and there is a huge benefit for British Columbia. I'm proud of this. Every western Premier has seen the opportunities that are created by the Pacific gateway. The Premier of Saskatchewan, the Premier of Manitoba, the Premier of Alberta, the three territory Premiers — all of them say that this is an opportunity for Canada's future.

It will take our work. It will take the work of my office, the work of our Transportation Ministry, the work of our opposition, the work of our federal MPs in Ottawa from all parties to encourage the federal government to make that kind of quantum-leap investment. It is a leap into the future, and I think that's what people have some challenge with here. It's a leap from where we've been to where we want to go.

In the rest of the continent, I can tell you there are billions of dollars being invested on the west coast of the United States to try and capture our markets. There are billions of dollars being invested on the west coast of Mexico to try and capture our markets. We are the place. We're closer to those markets. We're three days closer to Chicago from an Asian country through Prince Rupert. We're closer from Vancouver. We're closer from the other ports that we have in this province.

We are ready to go. We need the federal government with us. With their help, with everyone's help,

with British Columbians' help, with Canadians' help, with the western Premiers' help, we're going to get the dollars, and we're going to do it.

M. Sather: The new deal for Canada's cities and communities under former Prime Minister Martin was to give \$5 billion in gas taxes back to communities over the next five years. Does the Premier see indications that the current federal government is committed to the New Deal for Cities?

Hon. G. Campbell: Yes, they are. I think this is important. I mentioned yesterday as we commenced our estimates that we should be concerning ourselves with the issue that's known as fiscal imbalance. I mentioned to the Leader of the Opposition that it would be important to hear what the opposition felt about fiscal imbalance.

Fiscal imbalance is not just about the federal government and the provincial governments. It's about municipal governments. It's about first nations, aboriginal governments. It's about taxpayers.

Our task as we work with the federal government is to make sure that we are getting the best value for taxpayers. There is no question that just as the provinces go to the federal government and say, "We need more resources," local governments come to us and say: "We need more resources."

I think that if we reach out and engage the federal government in this discussion, it will make a significant difference in the long-term benefits that we can have for British Columbia. When we were told that with regard to this we were different than other provinces, we were told the dollars would flow through. We said that it doesn't have to flow through the provincial government. Send them to the Union of British Columbia Municipalities, and let the municipalities themselves sort out what they're going to do with those.

We think that was an important initiative. There is no suggestion — in fact, there is the opposite — that there would be anything except the continuation of that.

[1730]

The federal government, as I understand it, is trying to encourage a cities agenda across the country. That is important. The \$635 million for the New Deal for Cities and Communities is carrying on, as is the \$5.4 billion for health care, as is the \$1.2 billion for the infrastructure framework, as is the \$450 million for rapid transit, as is the \$50 million for the Asia Pacific Foundation, as is the \$30 million for the Port of Prince Rupert, as is the \$12 million for broadband for rural and northern communities — and the \$100 million for mountain pine beetle and the \$590 million that the federal government is contributing to Pacific gateway.

We are building a very powerful partnership with Canada. That powerful partnership is going to be put to work for the people of British Columbia so we have the kind of prosperous future that they all deserve.

M. Sather: The *Looking to the Future* document notes investment needs of \$23 billion over the next few years

for transit in Canada. To the Premier: how much are we seeking from the federal government for transit? I know we have a commitment for the Canada line, so how much are we seeking, and do we have other commitments?

Hon. G. Campbell: In terms of the national transportation strategy, we laid out a ten-year plan that we thought we would require in terms of federal commitments. I think it's about \$33 billion over the next ten years, and I'm just doing this from the top of my head.

In terms of the New Deal for Cities, the critical component of that is that people will decide for themselves. Either provinces or cities will decide for themselves where those dollars are going to go to maximize the benefits. What have we done in British Columbia? We have probably one of the largest public-private partnerships in the history of the country, which is a \$1.7 billion investment in the Canada line. That's \$450 million coming from the federal government.

We haven't asked specifically for transit. We've asked for commitments to transportation infrastructure. We spend, today, far in excess of the gas tax that we take into British Columbia to support our transportation infrastructure. We have invested substantially — literally billions and billions of dollars — in public transit. The Canada line is public transit. The Evergreen line is public transit.

The new Gateway strategy, twinning the Port Mann Bridge, opens up public transit opportunities to that corridor for the first time in 20 years. We're investing in public transit. Communities are getting resources they need for transit from the gas tax. They will make their choices with regard to that.

I think we've seen a significant contribution from the federal government, but there is clearly going to have to be more as we move ahead. We believe there are opportunities for us to complement the federal government as we do this. We will allocate our resources to public transit. We will allocate our resources to goods movement. We will encourage the development of well-designed communities, encourage walking and cycle use, and reduce the transportation load we put on. That's all part of what our strategy is as we build a healthy community base for our economy to thrive in.

M. Sather: I made note of the Premier's comment about asking for infrastructure en masse, but I just wanted to ask him also about looking to the future. I noted that current agreements for the funding of the national highway system are set to expire with no commitments in place. What is the province seeking in the way of money and commitments with regard to the national highway system?

Hon. G. Campbell: I believe it was in January of this year that Prime Minister-elect Harper — or maybe it was just before he was elected — wrote to the chair of the Council of the Federation, who this year was Premier Klein. He pointed out there would be a \$2 billion border infrastructure and highway infrastructure

fund designed to upgrade Canada's national highway system. I don't have the details of the federal budget in my hands, but it was reflected in their federal budget — literally hundreds of millions of dollars for highway infrastructure improvements.

[1735]

In the letter in January, Mr. Harper said there would be about \$600 million a year for federal investment in highways and border crossings. Both of those things are critical to us.

We believe, for example, that the third phase of the Kicking Horse Canyon is going to be a critically important Gateway project for British Columbia. The border infrastructure that we're creating from the east of the province to the west of the province is important to the northwest flow of goods. The Cariboo corridor is going to be an important part of the northwest flow of goods for us in British Columbia.

We will use the federal resources that are provided to us in a way that maximizes benefits for British Columbians. We have been investing in upgrading Highway 1. We will continue to do that. We have been doing it in partnership with the federal government for the last... I think it's since 2003 that that has been taking place. We are going to continue to invest in that, and it really shows the value of the partnership that is being created between the province of British Columbia and the federal jurisdiction.

This is a partnership that says that we are there and we're responsible to the people that are sending us dollars to maximize their benefits. It is a partnership that requires us to highlight what our priorities are and where we would like the first dollars to go. We've been able to do that and work in a way that people, frankly, from all parts of the province have benefited from. In Prince Rupert they benefited. In Golden they benefited. In the border infrastructure that we've seen in Surrey and Creston, etc., we've seen benefits. We've seen benefits around the province. North, south — we've seen benefits.

We want to keep that partnership moving ahead. My understanding is that there is a \$2.4 billion highways and border infrastructure fund that's being put in place. There is a \$2 billion Canada strategic infrastructure fund, and there's \$2.2 billion for municipal and rural infrastructure over the next five years under the recently introduced federal budget.

We will maximize the benefits of those for British Columbians. We will get our fair share of those. The Prime Minister has said that he will treat every province equally. That's important for us. But we know that when we work with the federal government, we will maximize the benefits for British Columbians. We'll continue to work to do that.

M. Sather: When our caucus visited Prince George this winter, we heard the city is keen on becoming a refuelling point for major air freight traffic to Asia. There is apparently interest from at least one major carrier. It is said that this development would create between 4,000 and 5,000 jobs. The problem is that

Prince George needs a runway extension that would accommodate Boeing 747s, at a cost of \$15 million.

I wanted to ask the Premier what the government's view of this development is. Has the government had any discussions with Ottawa about this possibility?

Hon. G. Campbell: As I'm sure the member opposite is aware, we have been investing significantly in airport infrastructure across the province. An expansion of the Prince George airport was opened last year. We've expanded the Cranbrook runway. We're expanding the Kamloops runway.

[Applause.]

We're expanding the Kamloops runway, and we're also doing the runway in Kamloops. I don't know if you knew that.

[Laughter.]

We've expanded the Comox.... We opened a new terminal there. In Prince George they have.... You're right. I thought I'd mentioned that earlier. There is major excitement about the possibility for the expansion of their airport, as well as the creation of a major transportation hub — what we call an inland port in Prince George, which we believe will create thousands and thousands of jobs.

The Minister of Economic Development has been working on that with the people in Prince George. The Minister of Transportation is certainly aware of that. As we bring that project together we will have a chance to move forward with it, as we did with other communities who came forward with strong economic cases for their initiatives. We have others that we will be announcing, I think, in the next number of weeks,

There is a real opportunity for us to understand this. Regional airports are critical tools of economic expansion. We will be encouraging the federal government to participate with us, to contribute with us — whether it's through Western Economic Diversification, whether it's through their transportation strategy or whether it's through the Asia-Pacific Initiative.

[1740]

It may even be possible to generate resources through the pine beetle strategy to make sure we're diversifying those economies. All of those opportunities are in front of us. We're putting together the plan, and we intend to execute the plan. We'd like to try and do it for Prince George, just like we were able to do it for Cranbrook.

Our vision is really to create opportunity here, where the Prince George Airport Authority can develop its air cargo hub. It is a critical economic opportunity. We know that it will require expansion of the runway. We realize that will require investment. We'll do the proper business case analysis and the proper feasibility analysis. If it is a go, if it is a green light, we will be going to the federal government and asking them for participation in Prince George, just as they participated in Cranbrook and other airports across the province.

M. Sather: I wanted to ask the Premier some questions about the B.C.-Alberta memorandum of under-

standing on the bilateral water agreement negotiations. This was signed in March of last year by B.C. and Alberta for sound management of transboundary waters. It primarily concerns the Peace River. That's the major river flowing between our province and Alberta.

There are four phases to this agreement, with a goal of completing a final agreement in three years, subject to direction by ministers. In terms of information needs, the goal includes ascertaining historic flow levels. I want to ask the Premier: what work is being done on interpretation of the historic and natural flows, including climate change impact?

Hon. G. Campbell: The Mackenzie River Basin Transboundary Waters Master Agreement was put together in 1997, and the Alberta and British Columbia MOU on environmental cooperation and harmonization was signed in 2004. The Peace River will be the primary focus of that agreement.

There had been discussions in Alberta about the potential for hydroelectric power being developed in that river. They wanted to be sure they had the proper flows. The water management agreement will address water quality and water quantity at key transboundary river crossing points into the Mackenzie River Basin. The agreement will be based on scientific requirements to protect the integrity of the aquatic ecosystem and will contain protocols for ongoing monitoring and assessment.

The negotiations for the memorandum of understanding were endorsed at a joint cabinet meeting on March of 2005. It really solidified the bilateral process and guides the development of any water management agreement that takes place. The MOU targets completion of the agreement within three years — that is, by March of 2008. There is work ongoing.

The development of the bilateral agreement does include four phases: information-gathering and sharing, negotiation, consultation and final approval. Following the information-gathering phase, which is not yet complete, and prior to entering negotiations with Alberta, a negotiation mandate will be developed for the government's approval prior to us going forward.

I think it is important to note that, as with many of these situations, the activities that take place on one side of the border do have significant impacts on another side of the border. We thought it was sensible for us to work with Alberta with regard to that.

Information that's gathered will be compiled into a report that will be shared with both jurisdictions. The final agreement may well impact our ability to produce energy. That's obviously one of the reasons why we're going to pay as much attention to it as we will over the years ahead. We clearly see a huge opportunity for us in British Columbia, but we also see that the opportunity is going to require consultations with Alberta and understanding from Alberta, as well as with first nations across the province, as we look at what our watershed demands are.

[1745]

As the member opposite, I'm sure, is aware, we are putting substantial demands on our watersheds across

British Columbia. The Minister of Environment is developing a water plan. The Minister of Environment will be working in concert with the Minister of Energy with regard to the development of this MOU, and it will be a number of years before it is completed.

M. Sather: The W.A.C. dam had a very negative ecological effect on the Peace-Athabasca delta in Alberta. I'm asking the Premier if similar concerns have been discussed with regard to Site C on the Peace. The Premier did make reference to the possibility of this agreement having some effect on energy developments in British Columbia, so I wanted to ask the Premier if that is a concern that's been brought up.

Hon. G. Campbell: Clearly, we are continuing to have discussions with the first nations in northeast British Columbia. We believe that is a critical component of managing this watershed. We will continue to do that.

I also think it's important to note that the dams that the member opposite is referring to are the very dams that British Columbians are saying we must keep in public ownership. They have created for us an enormous competitive advantage. It does, I think, bring into question the whole issue of balance. While we may not today be in a position where we could do that, we would go through a full process and detailed review prior to us making any decisions on that.

The member should also know that we have launched a new energy review. I referred to this last night in the estimates with the Leader of the Opposition. That calls for sustainable energy; it calls for energy sufficiency over the next ten years. We want to be self-sufficient in energy over the next ten years in British Columbia. That's going to require investment. It's going to require us to make decisions, as a population in the province, with our citizens.

The member opposite should be clearly confident in this. Our environmental assessment processes include first nations, and certainly they will include northeast British Columbia first nations. They include environmental impacts.

They include the whole flow downstream of that, and in working with Alberta, we'll be looking at water flows that are required for the agriculture industry and communities in that basin. I think that's a critical component of this. I believe that's a critical part of what we can do and what we should do as we move ahead.

M. Sather: I have no more questions.

Vote 9: Office of the Premier, \$12,482,000 — approved.

Hon. G. Campbell: I move the committee rise, report resolution and ask leave to sit again.

Motion approved.

The committee rose at 5:49 p.m.

The House resumed; Mr. Speaker in the chair.

Committee of Supply (Section B), having reported resolution, was granted leave to sit again.

Committee of Supply (Section A), having reported resolutions, was granted leave to sit again.

Hon. M. de Jong moved adjournment of the House.

Motion approved.

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

The House adjourned at 5:50 p.m.

PROCEEDINGS IN THE DOUGLAS FIR ROOM

Committee of Supply

ESTIMATES: MINISTRY OF
ATTORNEY GENERAL AND MINISTER
RESPONSIBLE FOR MULTICULTURALISM
(*continued*)

The House in Committee of Supply (Section A); H. Bloy in the chair.

The committee met at 3:03 p.m.

On Vote 15: ministry operations, \$377,024,000 (*continued*).

R. Chouhan: Continuing with our questions from this morning, my next question is: how much money does the provincial government receive every year for immigrant settlement services from the federal government?

[1505]

Hon. W. Oppal: There is a formula. The formula is based upon the number of immigrants that come into the province. Currently that figure is between 37,000 and 40,000 a year. The figure is \$1,009 per immigrant. That is the formula that has been in place for some time. Last fall we negotiated an agreement with the then federal government wherein they agreed to approximately triple the amount of that funding.

However, there's been a federal election since that time, and while the new government has indicated that they are prepared to honour the commitments made by the prior government, and while we're optimistic that we'll receive a much larger amount of federal funding for settlement programs, we still do not have any confirmation as to the exact or precise amount of money

that we will receive from the federal government for those purposes.

R. Chouhan: Have there been any recent meetings or communications between the provincial government and the federal government to indicate that the current federal government will honour the decisions made by the previous government?

Hon. W. Oppal: Thank you for the question. As a matter of fact, approximately four weeks ago the Minister of Economic Development and I met with the new federal minister for immigrant services, and the meeting was very positive. We outlined our position for this province. We advised him of the importance and the significance of immigration and how it affects and what it means to this province.

The minister was optimistic, and I must say that when I left that meeting, I came back very much encouraged with the response. Having said that, we don't have anything firm other than what was reported in the budget in the last few days.

R. Chouhan: The Attorney General talked about the formula earlier in my previous question. How much of an increase is the province anticipating this year based on our increased number of landings?

Hon. W. Oppal: As I stated a moment ago, we're uncertain. I'm optimistic, but we are uncertain. I indicated a few minutes ago that the agreement that we had reached with the previous government represented a significant increase. However, while we left the meeting with the new minister with considerable optimism, we still do not have any firm agreement in place with new figures from the federal government.

R. Chouhan: I was looking at the service plan, and I saw the ministry's vision and mission statement. I would like to read those. It says: "Safe, sustainable and livable communities where immigrants can realize their full potential, racism is eliminated and cultural diversity is valued and celebrated." The mission statements reads: "We are responsible in government to meet the settlement needs of immigrants and refugees, to promote multiculturalism and to eliminate racism."

My question to the Attorney General is: what concrete steps have we taken, or is there a future plan that we have to realize those statements?

[1510]

[Interruption.]

K. Krueger: You keep asking questions like that, and we've got.... You've got enough lights for seven more, and that's it.

[Laughter.]

Hon. W. Oppal: We have in this province the B.C. settlement and adaptation program, and the B.C. anti-

racism and multiculturalism program. The goal of the latter program is to prevent and eliminate racism by enhancing community understanding of multiculturalism and cultural diversity in British Columbia.

We do that by a number of different initiatives. We support organizations and individuals who are involved in a wide range of projects. We provide funding to various organizations and communities through an RFP process that's intended to support a number of projects throughout the province. We make it our mission to enhance multicultural programs and to involve ourselves in NGOs, such as the Law Courts Education Society, the People's Law School and organizations of that sort that are involved in multiculturalism issues and multiculturalism initiatives.

The Chair: Member, if you can control your questions.

R. Chouhan: I'll make sure that no bulbs are blown after this.

Earlier this month, on May 3, the Attorney General received a letter from the Immigrant Integrating Coordinating Committee. More than two dozen groups belong to this committee. The letter says that immigrant settlement organizations are being strangled by the diversion of 47 percent of the federal transfer to ESL services outside the B.C. settlement and adaptation program.

Will the Attorney General commit to fulfilling the committee's request to devote all increases in the federal transfer or any other provincial settlement funds directly to the core immigrant settlement services?

Hon. W. Oppal: I'm not in a position at this stage to commit the province to a particular course of funding when, in fact, we don't have any certainty as to what funding, if any, we will get from the federal government. We expect that the funding we get will be significant, but it would be improper and speculative of me to come to any conclusion as to what that amount would be and where it ought to go.

Suffice it to say that we consider applications on their merits. There is an RFP process in place, and that is essentially a merit-based process wherein organizations make applications. The applications are considered on merit in a non-political way, and the funds are dispensed pursuant to that particular procedure.

R. Chouhan: We'll talk about RFP later on today. However, last year when we were debating the Ministry of Finance estimates, I asked questions of the Minister of Finance. The Minister of Finance promised to put all money received from the federal government for immigrant settlement services into immigrant settlement services.

Would the Attorney General now agree with the Minister of Finance to put all of those moneys into immigrant settlement services?

Hon. W. Oppal: Once we receive the money, we will be in a position to meet with Treasury Board and

with the various stakeholders in the multicultural community to determine where the funding ought to be directed.

[1515]

We have regular meetings with organizations in the multicultural community. For instance, on June 1, I have a meeting scheduled with AMSSA. We meet on a regular basis. There was a meeting two Fridays ago with the advisory committee.

We meet fairly regularly with various immigrant groups and various multicultural groups. They will be kept apprised as to potential funding that may be available for their programs. At this stage, in any event, I'm not really in a position to give concrete advice or, indeed, any commitment as to where those funds will be directed.

R. Chouhan: I'm sure the Attorney General will agree with me that 47 percent of all the federal money that we receive for immigrant settlement services is put into the general revenue in British Columbia. Now, the question is: would the Attorney General agree to put all that money that we receive from the federal government to be utilized for immigrant settlement services and not to put that into the general revenue?

Hon. W. Oppal: I think it's a bit misleading to say that only 47 percent of the money that's received from the federal government goes directly into immigrant services and the balance goes into the consolidated revenue fund. The reason I say this is because that money may go into the consolidated revenue fund, but then it goes out to other forms of ESL training. It goes out to the Ministry of Advanced Education so that instructors may be trained to teach ESL.

There are various other channels that that money goes out to. While it may go into the consolidated revenue fund, there is a stream that goes outward from that consolidated revenue fund. That money.... Where the recipients of the money from the federal government are earmarked towards multicultural programs, it often will go to the consolidated revenue fund.

R. Chouhan: It's 52 percent of money that is being spent on immigrant settlement services. Approximately 47 percent to 48 percent goes into consolidated general revenue. That money, from the last conversation I had with various officials, is sent to different community colleges to provide ESL services, I understand.

First, when an immigrant comes to Canada there used to be — I think it's reduced now — \$975 per person to come to Canada. That was the landing fee they paid, and then approximately the same amount of money, about \$1,006, is given to the provincial government to help those immigrants to settle in the province where they choose to settle.

When 47 percent of that money is sent to other educational institutions — although they provide good service; I'm not challenging the service that you see from them — it's the immigrants who have to go and

pay an additional fee to get those services. It's like double-billing. So my question is: rather than spending that money or directing that money to those educational institutions, why do you not direct that 47 per cent of the total amount of money be given to organizations like AMSSA so they can provide those services without any additional cost?

[1520]

Hon. W. Oppal: This practice of moneys going into the consolidated revenue fund was established under the former NDP government in 1996-1997. The policy has been in force since that time. But I would remind the member that while the money goes into that fund, it then goes out to the various colleges that are involved in either teaching ESL or training teachers and instructors who would teach ESL programs. So the money is still being spent on immigrant services or ESL training.

The member asked about why the money would not go to an organization like AMSSA. While AMSSA has done excellent work over the years of its existence, the fact is AMSSA is an umbrella organization, and while they're instrumental in the establishment of programs and policies, they do not directly involve themselves in the same types of programs that their subsidiary, if I can use that word, agencies involve themselves in.

R. Chouhan: The Attorney General has talked about this policy that was set by the previous New Democratic government. I also want to remind the Attorney General that the previous NDP government also had the Human Rights Commission in this province. If you dismantle that.... You did not continue with that policy, which everybody liked, but you're going to continue with this policy.

My question, also, is.... The services that are being provided to colleges in the lower mainland are not available outside of Vancouver and Victoria. What about access to these services for people who are settling in Prince George and Kamloops and Kelowna and other areas of British Columbia?

Hon. W. Oppal: As far as the member's concern or question that if we continued on with the practice of the former NDP government in the process by which funds from the federal government are directed through the consolidated revenue fund, and we maintained that practice but did not maintain the Human Rights Commission — that perhaps there's some inconsistency of conduct....

My reply to that would be that there are many good things that the former NDP government did. We're not prepared to throw the baby out with the bathwater. This government determined in 2001, as I stated earlier this morning, that the Human Rights Commission wasn't doing what it should have been doing. For those reasons, as the result of an independent review, it was statutorily eliminated.

[1525]

The second issue raised by the member was that the funds appear to be directed towards the lower

mainland. I can tell you that the University College of the Cariboo Williams Lake campus received funding, as did the Northwest Community College in Prince Rupert, the North Island College in Port Alberni and the North Island College in Campbell River. The North Peace Diversity Society, as well, received funding for these services.

I appreciate that more funding was directed towards the lower mainland and Vancouver Island, and the reasons for that are obvious. This is where the vast majority of immigrants settle. Hopefully, in time, as the northern communities and the communities outside the lower mainland become more culturally diverse, those policies and programs would be directed where they are needed.

R. Chouhan: I thank the Attorney General for recognizing the good work done by the NDP government.

According to the Conference Board of Canada, this country as a whole loses at least \$4 billion in income annually due to the underutilization of learning credentials, including those of immigrants. Given the magnitude of the negative impact this must be having on our provincial economy, how can the current level of funding for immigrant support and settlement services be justified? These are the types of services that help immigrants compete in and contribute to our economy.

Hon. W. Oppal: There are two programs that are relevant. The first would be the international qualifications program, and the second is a B.C. Skills program. Both those programs are administered through the Ministry of Economic Development.

I would point out that the federal government, in its budget, announced that it would be providing funding at a federal level, in a cooperative level with the provincial government that's funded federally, for recognizing foreign credentials. That's an issue, of course. That's a valid issue in this province. Also, I want to tell you that this government has earmarked \$5 million for ESL training in the new budget, the budget that came down in the spring.

R. Chouhan: Is the Attorney General aware of, or has he seen, a strategy report on social and economic benefits of immigration to B.C.?

Hon. W. Oppal: I understand there is a document in existence, but it came into being in the previous Liberal government prior to 2005. Having said that, I'm well aware of the benefits that our society receives from immigrants. One only has to look at our society in order to realize the benefits that immigrants bring to any economy and to any country and to the advancement of the culture of that country. We've seen that in spades in this province.

[1530]

One only has to go to Richmond to see the amount of investment that's come here from Hong Kong, from China and from Taiwan. Similarly, one has to go to

Surrey and see the vast amount of investment that's been put into the economy from immigrants who have come here from India, the South Asian immigrants. I don't think we need any kind of empirical evidence to justify or to prove the point that immigrants who come here are an immense benefit, both economically and socially, for the community at large.

We are a country, of course, largely built on the work and the endeavours of immigration. So while I have not read the report, I think that I can agree with the member that immigrants are a tremendous benefit to our economy and to our province.

R. Chouhan: If and when the Attorney General sees a copy of that report, would he be willing to share that copy with me?

Hon. W. Oppal: I'm given to understand that the document is going to form the basis of a new government policy. It's going through the system in that particular fashion. I would expect the document would be available by the fall of this year, and I see no reason why the member could not have a copy of it at that time. At this stage it's still in the policy stage, and it may well be revised, and various things could be done with it.

R. Chouhan: I have written various letters to the Minister of Employment and Income Assistance regarding the problems that sometimes confront sponsors when their spouses or ex-spouses incur debts or social assistance obligations without the knowledge of their sponsors. This matter is apparently now under joint review by MEIA and the Ministry of Small Business and Revenue, which is responsible for the collection of sponsorship default debt.

Almost all of the people affected are persons of colour. Some of them are immigrants. Has the Attorney General taken any action with regard to these problems?

Hon. W. Oppal: The short answer is no. While I'm aware of the issue raised by the member, I have not been asked to get involved in it for reasons that appear apparent, on their face, in any event, and that is that they belong in other ministries. But there may well be issues there that may overlap into the Ministry of Attorney General and Ministry Responsible for Multiculturalism.

R. Chouhan: Yes, the ministries are looking into it, but it's also an issue of immigration settlement, so I would urge the Ministry of the Attorney General to look into this matter and do something to correct that situation.

Also, my next question is.... The Attorney General is no doubt aware of the problem of what are sometimes called fraudulent marriages or sham marriages. You must have read about it in newspapers these days. What steps is the Attorney General taking to protect women from this form of exploitation?

Hon. W. Oppal: The matters of sham marriages and marriages of convenience have been with us for 25 or 30 years. I recognize that in recent times we have seen an exploitation of women, particularly women from South Asia, who have been exploited for purposes of immigrant status and the like.

[1535]

The issue raised by the member is a valid one, but thus far I have not been asked to specifically get involved in the issue. I know of no offence that's being committed at this stage. I recognize that the women who are the victims of the sham marriages are put in a very difficult position, and it may well be that they need some form of assistance.

I suppose it's taken me a long time to tell you that I haven't done anything because nobody's asked me to do anything, but it's an issue worth examining.

R. Chouhan: The Attorney General is responsible for immigrant settlement services, and nobody has to ask the Attorney General to do it. It's the Attorney General's responsibility to look into these kinds of matters before being asked.

Mr. Chair, before I venture into my next topic, I would ask my colleague to ask a few questions.

The Chair: Welcome to the member for Vancouver-Mount Pleasant.

J. Kwan: Mr. Chair, it's always a pleasure to be in this chamber to ask questions. I have, I think, a simple question for the minister, and it impacts a couple of organizations in my riding, namely MOSAIC and the Immigrant Services Society. I believe AMSSA might be impacted as well, although I have yet to double-check that.

Here's the situation. These organizations provide a program called the ELSA program, which I'm sure the minister is familiar with. The ELSA program goes hand-in-hand with the child care program that has always been run as an integrated component of the service. Since the request-for-proposals process that the government initiated a little more than a year ago now, I guess, these services have been contracted separately.

The BCSAP child care funding does not cover the two months summer programming when the ELSA program continues to run. There are around 40 parents in MOSAIC alone whose children attend the child care program and who, therefore, will not be able to attend classes over the summer if the program is closed and if they're not funded for the child care component.

If we fill these spaces, if MOSAIC fills the spaces in the classroom, then there would not be adequate spaces for them to re-enter the program in September. Hence, if they do not re-enter the program, the child care spaces will be nearly empty. So, therefore, there's a bit of a conundrum here for the organization and for the broader community, which needs these services as well.

If the organization holds the spaces for the students for two months they will, of course, be operating under

capacity. Therefore, because they are accountable to the ministry to fill the classes with a contracted number of spaces, they have a problem there as well. Now the child care program for ELSA is not funded through the Ministry of Children and Family Development during this time. It is tied to the enrolment in the spaces of the ELSA program. That's why these questions were not put to the Minister of Children and Family Development but, rather, here.

To compound the problem further for MOSAIC, for example, they currently have 17 children on the wait-list for the child care program. If they don't offer the summer program with the child care component, students will then have to wait at least six months to be able to enter into the program to catch up.

The amount of money that the organization is asking for, for MOSAIC, is only \$22,000 to run the child care program, which is at a reduced capacity. They are trying to find the cheapest way to do this. Normally, the amount is almost double, but they are trying to do this at a lower cost.

I'm asking the minister the question as to whether or not he can work with MOSAIC, with ISS and, potentially, with AMSSA to resolve this conundrum that they are in. If the minister can find some funding within his ministry to facilitate this, so that the adults can get the education they need and the children will get the child care support they need while their parent is going through the ELSA program in the summer period, I'd be very grateful.

[1540]

Hon. W. Oppal: I thank the member for raising that question. The concern is a very valid one. At the outset I want to say that I've long been an admirer of the work done by ISS and MOSAIC. I'm well aware of what they've done historically in this city and particularly in the city of Vancouver.

Both issues that have been raised by the member have been.... We've already met with them. We're very optimistic with the new federal funding that we expect we will get that we'll be able to address this concern that has been raised. I'm very optimistic.

J. Kwan: When can we find out?

Hon. W. Oppal: As soon as the cheque arrives from Ottawa.

J. Kwan: The reason I ask that is that time is of the essence because the enrolment process actually begins now, and if the organizations don't know, they are going to have to make some tough decisions.

I see that the minister is going to say something.

Hon. W. Oppal: Prior to the member coming into the chamber, I stated that we had meetings recently with the new federal Minister of Immigration, and we're quite hopeful after our meetings that something would be happening in fairly short order, and we're optimistic. I can tell the member that we are on the

phones to Ottawa, and we recognize that there's urgency not only in the issue raised here, but in others as well.

J. Kwan: Then I'll just say this. As soon as the phone rings for the minister in his office, I would ask him to extend the courtesy of letting me know. I'm sure the minister will convey the good news to the organizations but more importantly, also, to the broader community which is waiting to see if they can sign up for the program.

R. Chouhan: My next line of questioning is about foreign credentials. Has the minister taken any steps or has he any plan to recognize credentials of the foreign-trained professionals — i.e., doctors, engineers, teachers, nurses, etc.?

Hon. W. Oppal: This is really an issue that is the exclusive province of the Ministry of Economic Development. That ministry is working with various regulatory bodies. Having said that, I have met with some groups who have come to me with those concerns, and as a member of government I can tell the member that we're all concerned about the issue of foreign credentials, for we live in a province in which the economy is such that we need more nurses and doctors. We need professionals and skilled and unskilled workers, and foreign credentials are an issue that we as a government are very much concerned about.

[1545]

I could tell you that work is taking place in that area. In the fall we licensed 17 new IMGs, international medical graduates, to new residencies here in the province. My ministry was involved in that because there was a multicultural component to it, but it was essentially the endeavour of the Ministry of Economic Development and the Ministry of Health.

To answer your question in a long way, I can say that we're working with other ministries, but it's essentially the policies and the endeavours of other ministries.

R. Chouhan: Is there any time line under which your ministry is working to find out when these foreign-trained professionals will be realizing some help in a concrete way?

Hon. W. Oppal: It's difficult to answer that question, because there are so many different regulatory bodies, so many different professions. I would imagine there's no clear answer that pertains to all of the various professions that are involved with people who have foreign credentials.

R. Chouhan: Could the Attorney General explain what, if any, responsibility the ministry retains regarding the provincial nominee program?

Hon. W. Oppal: We have somewhat of a peripheral responsibility in that we work with the processing of proposals under the nominee program. But again, this

really is a matter that lies largely within the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Economic Development.

R. Chouhan: How does the Attorney General coordinate its mandate to provide settlement services with the Ministry of Economic Development and its delivery of the provincial nominee program?

Hon. W. Oppal: There are ongoing meetings at the ministerial level, at the deputy minister level and at the assistant deputy minister level, and there have been a number of discussions in a cross-ministerial way with people from other ministries, so these issues come up on a regular basis. They have come up most recently in dealing with how the multicultural communities could get involved in the 2010 Olympics, so that's one area where we have cross-ministerial cooperation in those areas.

R. Chouhan: Does the ministry set any specific goals or numeric targets for its involvement with this program? If not, why not?

Hon. W. Oppal: At the risk of emphasizing my own insignificance in this program, I have to admit that in a peripheral role we don't really set the targets. We work with the Ministry of Economic Development, which has the major responsibility in the area of nominee programs and matters of that nature.

R. Chouhan: Speaking of the 2010 Olympics and the participation in those games from the multiculturalism point of view, is there any money set aside by the Ministry of Attorney General to make sure that multiculturalism takes prominence in the 2010 games?

[1550]

Hon. W. Oppal: We haven't set any money aside as such, but I can tell the member that we're working with other ministries as to how we can celebrate the games with a multicultural input and a multicultural influence. We as a government recognize the importance of the multicultural communities and how they enrich the fabric of the Canadian mosaic, if you will.

It is the policy of this government to emphasize the multicultural character of our province when the 2010 games arrive. We're in the initial planning stages at this stage, and my ministry is being asked and is working with other ministries as to how we can bring in the concept and principle of multiculturalism as well as the participation of multicultural communities in the planning of the 2010 games.

R. Chouhan: Is there any plan to construct a committee or some kind of a body which will make sure that multiculturalism and multicultural communities will be given a prominent role in the 2010 games?

Hon. W. Oppal: We don't have a committee, but I can tell you that we discuss these issues on an ongoing basis whenever the issue of the Olympics comes up,

and multiculturalism isn't far from the table when that subject is broached. I can tell you that there's going to be a large multicultural theme for the 2010 Olympics. I can tell you that.

As far as specific committees being formed to do specific tasks, that still has not been ironed out. However, we know that we'll be going to the multicultural communities, and in fact we've already had some input from multicultural communities as to what they would like done for the 2010 Olympics. Various proposals have been forwarded to us, and we're in the process of examining them.

R. Chouhan: The service providers and employers that we have spoken to in the interior and smaller communities have told us how difficult it is to attract skilled immigrants to their communities because they lack adequate settlement and support services. These regional disparities have been made worse by the flawed RFP process that your government undertook. What is the Attorney General doing to address and rectify these significant gaps in services?

Hon. W. Oppal: I should point out that in answer to the previous question of the member, the Multicultural Advisory Council is working on the games as well. They will be providing advice to government as to how multiculturalism can play a role in the 2010 games.

The RFP proposal — the request for funding proposals — program was established so as to take political considerations out of the process. It is essentially a merit-based process, and I can understand that while some organizations may be disappointed where those organizations have not been successful in their bids, there are other organizations who are praiseworthy of the process.

[1555]

The object of the RFP process is that it is intended to be a merit-based process wherein each application is considered on its merits in order to determine whether or not there would be funding for a particular program.

R. Chouhan: What is the status of the B.C. Skills Connect for Immigrants program? My first question on that would be: how much of this training are immigrants required to pay for themselves?

Hon. W. Oppal: I'm not really able to answer that question, because that, again, is a matter that's within the purview of the Ministry of Economic Development. That minister would be in a far better position to give an answer as to the amount of funding that's directed to it.

R. Chouhan: Can the Attorney General tell from working with the Ministry of Economic Development if those kinds of programs would be available outside the lower mainland? Is there any information your ministry has received from the Ministry of Economic Development?

Hon. W. Oppal: There's no reason why programs that are available in the larger urban centres would not be available in areas outside the lower mainland or lower Vancouver Island. I would imagine that much of that would depend upon the population patterns and where there's a demand for services, but certainly, the programs are intended to cover the whole of the province. There's no geographical restriction as to the availability of programs.

R. Chouhan: Let's now talk about English as a second language. Your government announced in its recent budget speech that it would spend an additional \$5 million on ESL training. Where will that money be directed?

Hon. W. Oppal: We've had discussions with a number of service providers. After our discussions are complete we will be in a position to determine where that money would be spent and what programs would be the recipients of that additional funding.

R. Chouhan: In this year's service plan there's a performance measure related to the percentage of recent immigrants in language training who record a greater ability to use English. In this year's service plan the target for 2006-2007 is 76 percent, whereas in last year's plan the target for this year was set at 85 percent. Why has this target been lowered?

Hon. W. Oppal: These figures will vary from time to time. I don't think there is anything untoward with that movement. The shifts are there according to the needs.

[1600]

It may be that a percentage of recent immigrants in language training reported a greater ability to use English. That figure may vary with the number of people who are coming into the country from various countries, and so the ability to speak, read and write the language of the adopted country may vary with the immigration patterns of the country. It may well be that in a particular country or in a particular year we may be expecting more people to come from a country where the proficiency in English may be greater than in another year.

These are sort of moving targets. The figures will vary according to the source country from which the immigrants arrive here.

[S. Hammell in the chair.]

R. Chouhan: When the decision was made to lower that target, did we have data available to justify that decision?

Hon. W. Oppal: This adjustment, if you will, took place after a company called Synovate did a survey. As a result of that survey and study, that advice was given to government, and as a result of that advice, the target was varied. But as I said earlier, it's just as conceivable

that it could go up the following year depending on the patterns of immigration.

R. Chouhan: Similarly, in last year's service plan this same target was set at 80 percent for 2005-2006, whereas in this year's service plan the base is listed as 76 percent. Does this mean that this year the target was missed?

Hon. W. Oppal: You know, another way of looking at this is that we've achieved 95 percent of our target. The initial target was 80 percent. We attained or achieved 76 percent, and we're looking to move up to 78 percent the next year. These are flexible targets that are set. So 80 percent was a goal; we hit 76 percent.

R. Chouhan: What amount of ESL funding does B.C. provide on a per-immigrant basis?

[1605]

Hon. W. Oppal: In 2005-2006 the ministry spent \$16,579,821 for language services, and there were approximately 44,000 immigrants. I'm sure the member's capable of figuring out the percentage of that. I'm not very good at it.

R. Chouhan: Could the Attorney General confirm that the money for this year is lower than last year; or is it higher than last year?

Hon. W. Oppal: It will be higher this year because we've added more money to the budget — the \$5 million that we've already referred to.

R. Chouhan: How does this compare to what other provinces spend?

Hon. W. Oppal: I have to say that we haven't really done a comparative analysis. I think it's sufficient to say that with our large immigrant population and our present commitment from the provincial government as well as the commitment from the federal government, we're fairly generous in what we do. We could always spend more, but we have to live within budgetary limits. Overall I would suggest that we've done fairly well in this province.

R. Chouhan: The answer that we received last year during the estimates debates was \$476 per immigrant in B.C. as compared to an average \$987 per immigrant in other provinces. Is that information still available?

Hon. W. Oppal: I'm not in a position to comment on those figures, because those are not figures that we provided. I don't know where the member got those figures, but I have to tell the member that I'm unfamiliar with those.

R. Chouhan: Those were the answers we received from the Attorney General in the estimates budget debates last year in November.

Now, I understand that the per-immigrant expenditure in this area in other provinces, especially in Ontario and Quebec, has gone up to approximately \$1,500 to \$1,700, while in B.C. the figure is still \$476. Why is there a discrepancy? Why do we have a lower number as compared to others?

[1610]

Hon. W. Oppal: I think I have to correct the figures of the member. Prior to this year British Columbia received \$1,006 per immigrant. The immigrants numbered between 37,000 and 44,000 — so roughly around 40,000 a year. Ontario was getting around \$900 per immigrant, while Quebec was getting \$3,400 per immigrant. So the member's figures are quite correct there, in that Quebec was getting a lot larger funding than we were getting.

A number of events took place last summer. I noticed this discrepancy. We noticed it, and the Premier then sent a letter to the Prime Minister last summer pointing out the inequities of the situation. I then had three meetings with Mr. Volpe, who was the Immigration Minister at that time, again pointing out the discrepancies.

The federal government then in November announced that our funding would be on par with Ontario, but it would be below Quebec's funding per immigrant. The reason for that is that Quebec, under our federal structure, has been placed in a somewhat unique position in that it has, through arrangements with the federal government, established immigration offices in various centres around the world.

No other province has done that. To allow for that, the federal government has provided additional funding per immigrant for Quebec as opposed to other provinces. The funding that was promised to us would be approximately triple the \$1,006 per immigrant that we were getting in the previous agreement.

As I said at the outset today, we're hopeful that the new government will honour the commitments of the outgoing government. We're optimistic, but at this stage we're hopeful.

R. Chouhan: We also keep our fingers crossed that they will honour that promise. We need that money here in British Columbia. Now, compared to other provinces, how does B.C. rank in the number of ESL hours delivered per immigrant?

Hon. W. Oppal: I don't have the comparative figures. I can tell you that we served 12,000 students in the ELSA program.

R. Chouhan: I think we have asked to clarify this question, but let me clarify it again. My friend from ISS, Chris Friesen, has asked me to ask this particular question: why is the government funding user-pay ESL training when the programs are not integrated with provincial immigrant settlement services?

[1615]

Hon. W. Oppal: The government does not charge user fees. There are some colleges that are charging

user fees, but at the same time, I'm advised that there are subsidies available for persons who are unable to afford the user fees charged by the colleges.

R. Chouhan: In discussions with the dean of language programs at King Edward campus in March 2005 the dean confirmed that KEC received \$10 million over ten years of CSE transfer funds through the provincial government for ESL classes, including \$1 million for a financial aid program, contrary to the intent of CSE transfer payments. Now, is that program, that arrangement, still continuing with KEC?

Hon. W. Oppal: The figure that I have is that the government funds Vancouver Community College in the amount of \$4.157 million per year.

A Voice: That's an 18-month contract.

Hon. W. Oppal: Sorry; that's an 18-month contract for \$4.1 million, for Vancouver Community College. I'm unaware of what percentage of that would go to the King Edward campus.

R. Chouhan: Adult immigrants in B.C. wishing to enrol in ESL classes beyond an upper beginner's level must pay for them, thus creating a two-tier system, while these courses are available free of charge elsewhere in Canada. Why don't we have the same arrangement in B.C. to provide free ESL training for upper levels of ESL training?

Hon. W. Oppal: We are looking to address the needs of the midlevel of ESL training, language training. There's no doubt that some colleges charge fees and have user fees. We're not really.... Those are really the policies of the colleges. I can tell you that we are looking at and re-examining the issues as far as funding for midlevel courses is concerned.

R. Chouhan: Would that be level three and above? Or only one level — four or five?

[1620]

Hon. W. Oppal: We are presently looking at levels four to six, which would be the levels required to get a person into the labour market.

R. Chouhan: What, again, is the time line for implementing that program?

Hon. W. Oppal: Well, it comes down to the same answer: it depends upon when we get the federal funding. If we get the federal funding, we can then put the plan in place. We sign the appropriate agreements, and we're away.

R. Chouhan: What is the budget for the anti-racism and multiculturalism program for this year?

Hon. W. Oppal: It's \$500,000.

R. Chouhan: How does the current budget for the anti-racism and multiculturalism program compare to its budget in 2004 and 2005?

Hon. W. Oppal: The same.

R. Chouhan: The figure we have received shows that it has been reduced by \$1.5 million in 2001 to \$500,000 last year. Could you confirm that figure, please?

Hon. W. Oppal: In 2001-2002 it was \$1.1 million, and then the present figure is \$500,000.

R. Chouhan: What's the policy justification for that reduction?

Hon. W. Oppal: It was a part of the core review process, but I would point out that in spite of the reductions, a cut to the core anti-racism program was minimal. The anti-racism efforts have since been focused on a critical incident response mechanism in partnership with communities and local governments. While there were reductions, the core anti-racism program is operating in a similar way as it did prior to the cut.

R. Chouhan: As a result of that reduction, I'm sure — and the Attorney General will agree with me — that there must be some negative impact on some of the services previously provided through the ministry. What were those services that received less funding, and what was the impact on them?

Hon. W. Oppal: There are no services as such. I should point out that the goal of the B.C. anti-racism and multiculturalism program is to prevent and eliminate racism by enhancing community understanding of multiculturalism and cultural diversity. There are funding streams to do that, but there are no programs as such. There are various organizations and individuals that provide a wide range of projects, and the ministry funds those and also is involved in supporting communities that participate in a critical incident response model to counteract racism.

There's some discretionary funding that takes place on a one-time basis in the critical incident response program.

[1625]

R. Chouhan: What was the budget for the CIRM program alone?

Hon. W. Oppal: There was \$200,000, and 22 communities have been involved.

R. Chouhan: Aside from the CIRM program, how many projects were funded with the anti-racism and multiculturalism program in 2005-2006?

Hon. W. Oppal: I'm going to give you an approximate number. The best that I can do is to say it's ap-

proximately 30, but we would be prepared to give you a complete list as to the precise number.

R. Chouhan: Thanks to Tony for that. Do you have a list of any projects outside the lower mainland and the capital region that were funded through this same program?

Hon. W. Oppal: Well, there are a number of them: the College of New Caledonia in Quesnel, Abbotsford Community Services, Cranbrook Women's Resource Society and Northwest Community College in Prince Rupert. Those are some of them. We could provide the member with a complete list of those organizations outside the lower mainland.

R. Chouhan: Thanks to Tony for providing that list. The only performance measure related to anti-racism in the current service plan relates to the critical incident response, CIRM. Previously, under the Ministry of Community, Aboriginal and Women's Services, there were four performance measures in the area of multiculturalism and anti-racism. What is the reason for this reduction in the accountability?

[1630]

Hon. W. Oppal: The answer is that they were reduced just to make them more understandable to members of the public. There were so many performance measures prior to this that they were overlapping and becoming meaningless to any independent third party who was looking at them. So the purpose was to take the measuring stick and make it more concise, and that was the reason for it after a review. No services were cut back. These were performance measures as such. They're just a lot more understandable now.

R. Chouhan: My question is about enhanced accountability. What steps were taken to make sure the public has that access to the programs, and what steps did the government take to ensure that accountability is still there?

Hon. W. Oppal: The greatest example that I can think of is the public accountability involved in the RFP process, the tendering process, where the public has knowledge of what's happening, where there are open criteria and a merit-based system. That's a perfect example. The public has access to all that information as to the process, which therefore becomes accountable, and the public is able to understand it.

R. Chouhan: The feedback we have heard from the stakeholders indicates that CIRM is a welcome and successful program but that it would be more so if its funding was extended beyond three years. Are there any plans to extend the funding time lines for this program?

Hon. W. Oppal: We have in certain cases expanded the program beyond the three years, but save and ex-

cept for that, we are examining the whole of the program on an ongoing basis.

R. Chouhan: I also understand there's a considerable demand for this program all over the province. Are there any plans to increase its funding so that more communities can take part in it?

Hon. W. Oppal: At this stage there is no plan to extend it. However, these things are examined on an ongoing basis, and if there is a further demand for it, we will consider those demands and determine whether or not the demands will be met.

R. Chouhan: What steps has the AG taken to ensure there is an equitable and fair distribution of anti-racist and multicultural programs and services to both large and small organizations and to as many communities as possible, including smaller ones?

Hon. W. Oppal: I travel around the province, and I make people aware of the programs or of the policies of the ministry and the Ministry Responsible for Multiculturalism. We meet with a number of NGOs, so there can't possibly be any reason as to why people wouldn't know about the various programs. We have, of course, a website that reveals all of the programs and the policies that are available.

[1635]

R. Chouhan: We know of many cases in which smaller anti-racist and multicultural organizations lost out to larger ones in the RFP process. In some cases this has meant the smaller organizations had to surrender the programs they had successfully offered in the past. So is there any plan to ensure that those organizations which had the past experience will get funding so they can continue to provide those services in the smaller communities, as they had been doing before?

Hon. W. Oppal: Well, there are large organizations that were successful, and smaller ones. It's really difficult to provide an answer that will be meaningful to the member. The only thing I can say is that these things are examined on an ongoing basis, and the RFPs are provided for on a merit basis. I'm not really in a position to say if some of the larger or smaller organizations' needs will be addressed in a different way the next time.

R. Chouhan: What is the status of the Safe Harbour program?

Hon. W. Oppal: Well, the only Safe Harbour dialogue.... The program that I'm aware of is the one at the Kamloops Cariboo Regional Immigrant Society. It was done on a pilot project. I'm not aware of any other similar type of program in the province.

R. Chouhan: The Safe Harbour project began in Nanaimo in 2004. The local storefront businesses and agencies serve as sanctuaries for people who experi-

ence discrimination or harassment and who briefly need a safe place to go to.

That program was very successful. I hope the Attorney General would look into that and commit some funding to make sure that those participating stakeholders get the necessary funding to carry on that program.

[1640]

Hon. W. Oppal: The next project that's on the horizon is for Nanaimo. We're going to have some meetings with the people in Nanaimo in order to determine whether a similar endeavour can be achieved there.

R. Chouhan: In fact, that was started already by some people in Nanaimo in 2004. I hope when this new pilot project is starting, those people are consulted with so they also can share the experience they have gained throughout that process.

However, my next question is: during our debate in 2005 the Attorney General defended the open tendering process for settlement services if government-instituted, saying it was based on objective criteria. Why is the Attorney General now reviewing that process for procuring settlement and language services?

Hon. W. Oppal: The open tendering process was a part and a product of the core review, where it was felt that there ought to be a transparent and an open process for bidding so that the people who were either successful or unsuccessful knew what happened. It was based on merit.

We are constantly reviewing the process. I can tell the member that I've met with a number of people who weren't successful who have come to me, and we have to reconsider some of the applications. Often so many of them are meritorious, but it's a question of which ones have more merit than others. So there are difficult decisions that have to be made with respect to the various applications that are there.

Unfortunately, not everybody is successful in the bidding process. Having said that, we are re-examining the process and looking at the various comments that have been made to us.

R. Chouhan: The final report from this review is due on May 29. That's my understanding. Will the Attorney General commit to making this report public at that time?

Hon. W. Oppal: Well, we'll receive the report, and we'll examine it and see what parts of it are feasible and what parts of it are not, and what recommendations, if any, are ones that are practicable in all of the circumstances. Obviously, in due course we'll make it public.

R. Chouhan: In closing, I want to say that, in the past, before the Attorney General got into politics, he defended the Human Rights Commission. I hope he will change his mind again and defend the decision to

have a human rights commission. B.C. is the only province in Canada which does not have a human rights commission. We have been slammed by the United Nations, and it's important to have a human rights commission in British Columbia, like other provinces.

In closing, I also want to say thank you, Attorney General, for answering all the questions, and to the staff for your patience.

[1645]

L. Krog: I'm delighted to have an opportunity to ask the Attorney General a few more questions in light of the diligent work of the House leaders who've managed to free up a little more time. There are some areas I would like to cover briefly, if I might, with the Attorney General and the assistance of his staff here.

There is, I think, a general presumption that the faster the juvenile delinquents, as we used to call them — or young offenders now, to use the modern terminology — actually receive the consequences of their criminal activity, the better the result is likely to be in terms of preventing recidivism. It's fairly clear that, notwithstanding improvements that may have been made, there is often a very long period of time now between the commission of the offence or its discovery, the laying of a charge and the actual result, whether it be a guilty plea and disposition or a trial and disposition.

I'm just wondering if the Attorney General has concerns about this area, as do members of the public, and what his general response is.

Hon. W. Oppal: I thank the member for raising that point. As a matter of fact, the whole area of delay in the system is a matter of some concern to me. We have in the system now.... Police, upon arrest, give people promises to appear that may be returnable in six or eight weeks, and I'm just trying to find out why that's done and why we can't move that date up. Why is it that we take so long to get trials to court?

I was thinking out loud at either a forum or an after-dinner speech, and I said: "Why is it that the Americans can get their Enron cases on within six months to a year and we've had Pickton in custody for four years?"

There's something wrong with our system. I can assure the member that the concern that he's raised is an excellent one. It's something that I'm very much concerned with, because the delays that are inherent in the system.... Regrettably, the delays have often become a way of doing business for people within the system. I think we've become too comfortable in the way we do business, and the public is losing confidence in the system.

I've had conversations with the Chief Judge. There was, of course, the report of the Working Group on Street Crime that dealt with the issues of delay. For instance, it was discovered that in a typical case involving property crime in the city of Vancouver, the accused person has seven or eight appearances before they even get a trial date — or even more, in many cases. I find all of that to be unacceptable, and I can tell

the member that we are moving towards speeding up the process.

L. Krog: Through to the Attorney General, I appreciate that he has a very keen understanding of what are the obvious problems in the criminal justice system, and as I say, what is of particular concern to me is around the issue of juvenile crime. However, having satisfied himself that there is an issue, I haven't heard anything specific back in the Attorney General's comments about what he intends to do, whether in conjunction with the Solicitor General, responsible for policing.... In other words, what steps are presently being contemplated or what studies are being undertaken that will actually lead to a speeding up of the process?

I'm not worried about Mr. Pickton, but I am worried about a 14- or 15-year-old who gets into trouble with the law and for whom the passage of six months or a year is a pretty substantial portion of his life. When you're talking about someone who's 50, it's a much smaller percentage. A great deal can happen in that period of time — indeed, the commission of further offences — because there doesn't appear to be any dramatic consequences or any involvement with the victims. I'm just wondering if the Attorney General can provide some specific information about what he or his ministry is doing to solve that problem.

[1650]

Hon. W. Oppal: Under the current plans for the community court that I alluded to last night, we have fairly strenuous work going on with the prosecutors, the police, the court officials and the judges. I can say that this is creative work that's being done now, for perhaps the first time in my memory, where the community court concept can only come to fruition if we have a speeding up of the process — the speeding up of time lines. The police are involved in this, so we're moving very quickly within reasonable limits in addressing the issue of delay.

The point raised about young offenders and the delay occasioned there is, again, a valid concern. A three-month delay for a 15-year-old, of course, means a lot more, proportionately, than for a 50-year-old, as the member quite rightly points out. But we're working in an innovative way, in that we are diverting a lot more young offenders out of the court process and we're using some of the principles of restorative justice that we learned from the aboriginal communities.

I think it's an accepted fact that most young offenders who appear in our courts appear for probably the first and only time in their lives, so the idea is to divert them where it's appropriate to divert them. In many cases now, the police are diverting young offenders so that we are resolving the cases in that way in a much quicker way.

The real problem in the young offenders' cases involves the situation where a charge is laid and then a lawyer is appointed. The lawyer then adjourns the case a couple or three times and then asks for particulars, and the whole process, the procedure, begins. We want to address those things. There's a lot of work being

done in a fairly short period of time, and this is a matter of some concern to us.

L. Krog: I appreciate that diversion is being used more frequently and that the concept of community court is certainly coming around — and restorative justice. There does seem to be some very positive results of having those who've perpetrated criminal activity actually come into contact with their victims at a fairly early stage in the process. I think that's a very important principle. Again, it has been successful in other parts of the world.

There has also been the development, I gather, of what you referred to as mental health courts in a couple of places in the country, similarly reforming our traditional approach to criminal justice. I'm just wondering if the Attorney General could comment on the mental health courts and whether he sees any role for that or something like it in British Columbia.

[1655]

Hon. W. Oppal: This issue was considered approximately three years ago. Unfortunately, there wasn't any type of consensus that could be achieved between the various players in the business, so to speak. So what we are doing now is that within the concept of the community court, mental illness would be one of the issues the court would deal with. Substance abuse, alcoholism, homelessness: all of those factors that are said to be the root causes of crime could then be addressed in a holistic community court.

The community court model in the American cities does consider mental illness as a part of the process, and we would do so as well. It may well be that when we receive the final report from the committee and the people within the ministry that are developing a plan, it may not be workable. I don't know, but we'll have to wait until we see it.

L. Krog: The Attorney General mentioned, both earlier in his remarks and just now again, the problem around housing — that many who are appearing in the criminal justice system are people with some form of mental illness, often coupled with some form of substance abuse, and who are homeless or near homeless.

It seems to me that if you are going to deal with the problem of their appearing in courts.... It is an enormously expensive process, which maybe the public doesn't always think through, but for those, I'm sure, thousands of British Columbians who are watching this proceeding with interest today: you have the involvement of police forces and social workers and medical practitioners and often emergency wards, and you have court staff and judges and all of the people who go into that process in dealing with someone who's been accused of an offence. It's an enormously expensive process. I'm delighted that we live in a country that is prepared to devote significant resources to it, but it's at the other end of the problem.

If someone is homeless, if someone has an addiction problem, if someone has a mental illness, those are

issues that have to be dealt with. So if this community court is to function.... I hesitate to use the word "guarantees," but what information can the Attorney General provide today that indicates that the court will be able to work in coordination with the Minister Responsible for Housing or other agencies so that, in fact, if a decision is made that will solve this problem, something will actually happen. Right now, for example, in the city of Nanaimo there are dozens of people who are homeless by definition and who suffer from all of the issues that I've talked about.

Again, I'm looking for some assurance from the Attorney General that this is not going to be some pie-in-the-sky approach. In other words, what's going to work, and how is it going to work on the ground?

Hon. W. Oppal: I can apprise the member that housing will play a role in the new court. In fact, the Minister of Housing's representatives have been part of the discussions that have taken place. This is a cross-ministerial endeavour, and it will involve people from Health, Housing and from the Solicitor General — because of the Corrections and policing. It'll be a cooperative, collaborative approach.

L. Krog: I want to know if the Attorney General is familiar with the family justice visitation program. That is a program whereby there is supervised access between parties, particularly in situations where one party is under the — how shall I say? — thrall of a restraining order or something similar.

[1700]

Hon. W. Oppal: Well, I'm familiar with the concept, and I'm familiar with the fact that access in many cases is supervised through a third party. Often it's an independent third party, or it may well be through a relative or a friend.

L. Krog: My understanding is that it's available through family justice, that you can be eligible to receive between six to 12 visits over the course of six to 12 weeks and that there are often supervised exchanges as well. This obviously provides an opportunity for parents who don't have custody to get access in situations where restraining orders have been granted.

As the Attorney General is well aware, one of the criteria for which one can receive legal aid in this province is to show that there has been violence. Unfortunately — and I'm not suggesting that this is a majority of the cases by any stretch — there are a limited number of cases where in order to qualify for legal aid, allegations are made about abuse, restraining orders are granted and then the non-custodial parent is put in a situation where they're not going to be able to get access to their children very easily. My understanding is that the funding for this program has, in fact, been cut, and I'm wondering if the Attorney General can advise today whether or not that is true.

[H. Bloy in the chair.]

Hon. W. Oppal: This is a program that's very expensive. As you can appreciate, it often involves policing — for want of a better word — access visits and weekends. That necessarily involves considerable expense, but it's a service that's available. I agree with the member that it has been reduced from what it was. It's there, there are programs available and the service is available.

L. Krog: I'm wondering if the Attorney General can advise: what is the funding for this program? What is it today under the present budget, what was the funding previously, and on what basis have the cuts — and it sounds as if there have been — been made to the program?

Hon. W. Oppal: The program, as I stated earlier, is expensive. What happened was that many people remained in the program for an inordinately long period of time.

[1705]

The purpose or objective of the program is to have some supervised visits so as to alleviate the difficulties that exist between the parties. Eventually, people would be weaned off the system, and they'd be able to conduct their own visitations without the necessity of having a paid supervisor, so to speak. But that didn't happen. Many people remained in the program, and that became inordinately expensive.

In a world where priorities for resources are present, something had to be done in those circumstances. The funding for the program was reduced.

L. Krog: I believe I asked the Attorney General what the current funding for the program was, what the previous funding was and how much of a reduction. The Attorney General's response was to suggest that some people needed to be weaned off the program. It seems to me that you can wean one off the program by simply limiting the number of visits. I just wonder if he can answer my previous question and this question.

Hon. W. Oppal: I'm not able to give you the exact figures, but I will provide those for you.

L. Krog: Nanaimo has a men's resource centre. It's a fairly unique organization. It provides community resources to men particularly — assistance through separation and divorce, counselling, research and educational programs. In 2003 it got funding totalling about \$35,000.

They have concerns around materials prepared for domestic violence, etc., not being available for men who are victims of violence — although a much smaller number than women who suffer the same horrible fate, obviously. They provide counselling services and access to services for same-sex couples as well.

I'm just wondering if the Attorney General can tell me: will funding be available for the Nanaimo Men's Resource Centre in the future as it relates to their involvement in the justice system and providing a fairly unique service?

Hon. W. Oppal: I met with persons from the Nanaimo resource centre, and I found their concerns to be genuine. They had considerable merit.

It is a matter that we will obviously consider. There has been no decision made at this stage, but it's something that we'll have to consider, because I think they're providing a service in the community that's very much needed.

L. Krog: I'm wondering if the Attorney General can advise: what is the funding level for the duty counsel program in Supreme and Provincial Courts?

[1710]

Hon. W. Oppal: As I stated earlier, the total number of duty counsel in both the Provincial Court and the Supreme Court number 59. The funding for those 59 lawyers comes from the additional \$4.6 million that was placed into the legal aid budget last year.

L. Krog: I'm wondering if the Attorney General can advise: what has been the experience so far in terms of the provision of duty counsel in the Supreme Court in particular? Have there been any reports back? Is the Attorney General satisfied that this program is meeting needs? In a general sense, what's the feedback?

Hon. W. Oppal: The feedback has been extremely positive. I've spoken to a number of the judges in the Supreme Court in Vancouver, who tell me the program is working very well because it speeds things up. There's someone there who's available to give legal advice to unrepresented people, and matters get resolved much more quickly.

There has been no empirical research done at this stage, but so far the anecdotal evidence is very, very encouraging. We have examples and instances where people have actually reached accommodation as a result of duty counsel expending their efforts and energies in order to bring the parties together.

L. Krog: I'm wondering if he can advise: what is the budget for the B.C. Justice Review Task Force? Is the work of that task force accomplished within the ministry, or are the services contracted out?

Hon. W. Oppal: They have no budget as such. The Justice Review Task Force is really the collaborative work of partners within the justice system. Many people there are volunteering their time — the lawyers that are involved, representatives from the bar groups, the judges — and provide a very valuable service. The government provides funding for the writing of reports. There are volunteers that do other types of work, so it's an organization that provides valuable advice to government on a very cost-effective basis.

L. Krog: The administrative justice office. I'm wondering if the Attorney General can advise what it's doing and what it's costing. Are any of its services contracted outside the government?

[1715]

Hon. W. Oppal: The budget for the office is \$672,000. There are three staff. They provide education to government, and they provide support services for some of the tribunals. Most of all, right now they're involved in a subject that's dear to the member's heart: the Inquiry Act. They're involved in that process.

L. Krog: Well, I must say my view is that their work on the Inquiry Act for \$672,000 may leave a little bit to be desired, from my philosophical perspective.

Apart from that, I want to ask the Attorney General about the Burnaby Restorative Action Group, known as BRAG. That is a community-based group seeking to develop and implement a restorative justice program in Burnaby. I'm wondering if the Attorney General is aware of the program and if there is any indication that the Attorney General's ministry would be prepared to fund that.

Hon. W. Oppal: I want to correct the misapprehension on the part of the member. The persons in the administrative justice office are not involved at all in the policy matters involving the Inquiry Act. That's not their function.

I'm sorry; I didn't.... You'll have to repeat the last question.

L. Krog: I was asking about the Burnaby Restorative Action Group — its acronym is BRAG, unfortunately — a community-based group seeking to develop and implement a restorative justice program in Burnaby. It promotes the belief that justice should be restorative in that it focuses on repairing harms that have been caused by crime and conflict.

They are seeking some capital funding. They've sought support from the city of Burnaby and other senior governments. I'm just wondering if the Attorney General is aware of the program, what funding requests have been received and whether the Attorney General's ministry will be prepared to fund BRAG.

Hon. W. Oppal: The ministry is involved in various restorative justice measures. For instance, in Nanaimo we have a policy whereby the Crown directly refers persons to the restorative justice programs and diverts them. Similarly, there's a program in Ridge Meadows and one for various aboriginal communities. But save and except for those programs, the Crown does not involve itself in direct referrals for restorative justice. Primarily, the restorative justice measures are implemented through the Ministry of the Solicitor General.

L. Krog: The Attorney General is quoted in the *Times Colonist* on February 10, 2006, saying, "Maybe it's time we started doing something different, something creative," and that jail time, tougher sentences and mandatory minimums won't solve the property crime problem. I appreciate the Attorney General's comments that the Solicitor General has involvement in this, but

I'm just wondering: does the Attorney General have a philosophical commitment to the concept of restorative justice?

It seems to me that the request made by the Burnaby group, when we are funding, obviously, other restorative justice programs in the province.... I am somewhat familiar with the one in Nanaimo, which has proved, I think, according to those who are involved in it, to be extremely successful and far less costly. I'm wondering if the Attorney General, in light of my comments and his own quotation, is prepared to consider the request from BRAG.

[1720]

Hon. W. Oppal: Philosophically, I'm in favour of restorative justice where it's appropriate. Of course, restorative justice doesn't work in all cases. Having said that, obviously, I've made it known that while I favour tougher sentences and sentences involving incarceration in crimes of violence or where offenders are a danger to the public, the fact is that restorative justice clearly has its place in the continuum.

As far as the Burnaby project is concerned, we've had no requests for funding from Burnaby. It would be speculative of me at this stage to say that we would look at the proposal favourably without knowing any of the circumstances or the policies or the track record of the Burnaby project.

L. Krog: My understanding is that the Attorney General received a report. Justice for Girls presented a brief with recommendations to the Attorney General in September of 2005. The report and recommendations focused on the disproportionate number of aboriginal girls victimized — and I use the term "girls" advisedly; I'm not talking about women — by violence and concerns about the inadequacy of the justice system's response in B.C.

Recommendations in that report, I gather, included a call for an inquiry into or an independent systemic review of the justice system's response to violence against aboriginal girls in B.C.; education of justice personnel on the importance of using the hate-motivated crime provisions in the Criminal Code when sentencing violent offenders; and training of all justice system personnel regarding the impact of violence, poverty and racism in the lives of teenage aboriginal girls. My question to the Attorney General is: can he confirm whether he's acknowledged receipt of the Justice for Girls recommendations?

Hon. W. Oppal: Not only have I received the report, I met with them in Vancouver, and I was impressed with their commitment. I invited them to come back again. The reason for that is that while they gave me the report, I wanted to sit down with them for them to tell me what their priorities were and where what we had was workable.

As a matter of fact, I ran into one on the street about a month ago, and she advised me that they're coming back. So I think I'd be in a better position to tell you

exactly where we're going. I can say the discussions are really at a preliminary level. Clearly, their position and their concerns are meritorious.

We know that young aboriginal women and girls have been the victims of crime historically. Whether or not an inquiry would be appropriate in the circumstances is another case. Philosophically, I favour more concrete forms of action as opposed to general inquiries. I think we know why a lot of the aboriginal girls have been the victims of crime. When I say that we know, I mean that we know that many of them have grown up in circumstances of extreme poverty and circumstances where abuse has taken place, and we are very much concerned about their plight and about their concerns.

L. Krog: My question to the Attorney General is arising out of his comments. Do any personnel in the justice system now receive any training regarding the impact of violence, poverty and racism in the lives of aboriginal girls?

[1725]

Hon. W. Oppal: Well, the only people we train in the ministry are Crown counsel — the prosecutors. I can convey to the member that the members who are Crown counsel do receive training in the area of violence against women, but not specifically violence against aboriginal women. At the same time, I know that the Crown receives instructions and training in the area of aboriginal persons in the justice system and the historical injustices that have been perpetrated on aboriginal people in the justice system. So we've been doing that.

As far as the justice system in a global sense is concerned, while this is not my responsibility, I know that the Provincial Court judges, in their seminars, often have sessions dealing with aboriginal persons as victims and aboriginal offenders, and I know that in the Supreme Court we had similar types of instruction, if you will.

L. Krog: I believe I heard the Attorney General acknowledge that there are some systemic issues surrounding young aboriginal women. I'm just wondering: apart from the comments he's already made, does he have any specific plans to address those systemic problems in the justice system generally, whether within the Ministry of Attorney General or in conjunction with the Ministry of the Solicitor General or other ministries?

Hon. W. Oppal: Where we've specifically dealt with this issue.... In our ministry we're dealing now with the issue regarding the killings on the so-called highway of tears. We're doing some work on that in the Ministry of Attorney General.

As far as the other issues involving aboriginal victims, I know that there is work now being done in the Ministry of the Solicitor General, and I'd be more than happy to get involved in a program with them so that

we can put our resources to work in a collaborative way. I'd be more than pleased to get involved.

L. Krog: I have a constituent; I'm reluctant to use his name. He is a person who suffers from some form of mental illness, and he has been unable to obtain employment for a number of years now. He formerly was employed by B.C. Ferries. He is in receipt of persons-with-disabilities benefits now, arising out of his circumstances. I promised him that I would raise this issue with the Attorney General during the course of estimates.

He believes firmly that everyone should have the right to work in this country, regardless of any form of mental illness they may suffer, particularly when one is in the situation he is, where he is a religious taker of his appropriate medication. I'm wondering if the Attorney General is contemplating any changes to the Human Rights Code that might allow a person to demand the right to employment so that he would not face discrimination on the basis of some form of mental illness.

Hon. W. Oppal: The issue raised is a good one. We are re-examining the Human Rights Code with respect to age discrimination. I will instruct the officials in the ministry to look at the area of mental illness as well.

[1730]

L. Krog: I must say to the Attorney General that I'm extremely appreciative of his comments, and I appreciate the instructions he will give to his staff. I might say in closing today that I appreciate the work of his staff and those who've participated in the estimates debates today. Thank you.

Vote 15: ministry operations, \$377,024,000 — approved.

Vote 16: judiciary, \$60,722,000 — approved.

Vote 17: Crown Proceeding Act, \$27,500,000 — approved.

Vote 18: British Columbia Utilities Commission, \$1,000 — approved.

ESTIMATES: OTHER APPROPRIATIONS

Vote 45: Electoral Boundaries Commission, \$3,264,000 — approved.

Hon. W. Oppal: I move that the committee rise, report the resolution and completion of the Ministry of Attorney General and ask leave to sit again.

Motion approved.

The committee rose at 5:33 p.m.

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