

Third Session - Thirty-Eighth Legislature
of the
Legislative Assembly of Manitoba
DEBATES
and
PROCEEDINGS
Official Report
(Hansard)

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Speaker*

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MANITOBA LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
Thirty-Eighth Legislature

Member	Constituency	Political Affiliation
AGLUGUB, Cris	The Maples	N.D.P.
ALLAN, Nancy, Hon.	St. Vital	N.D.P.
ALTEMEYER, Rob	Wolseley	N.D.P.
ASHTON, Steve, Hon.	Thompson	N.D.P.
BJORNSON, Peter, Hon.	Gimli	N.D.P.
BRICK, Marilyn	St. Norbert	N.D.P.
CALDWELL, Drew	Brandon East	N.D.P.
CHOMIAK, Dave, Hon.	Kildonan	N.D.P.
CULLEN, Cliff	Turtle Mountain	P.C.
CUMMINGS, Glen	Ste. Rose	P.C.
DERKACH, Leonard	Russell	P.C.
DEWAR, Gregory	Selkirk	N.D.P.
DOER, Gary, Hon.	Concordia	N.D.P.
DRIEDGER, Myrna	Charleswood	P.C.
DYCK, Peter	Pembina	P.C.
EICHLER, Ralph	Lakeside	P.C.
FAURSCHOU, David	Portage la Prairie	P.C.
GERRARD, Jon, Hon.	River Heights	Lib.
GOERTZEN, Kelvin	Steinbach	P.C.
HAWRANIK, Gerald	Lac du Bonnet	P.C.
HICKES, George, Hon.	Point Douglas	N.D.P.
IRVIN-ROSS, Kerri	Fort Garry	N.D.P.
JENNISSEN, Gerard	Flin Flon	N.D.P.
JHA, Bidhu	Radisson	N.D.P.
KORZENIOWSKI, Bonnie	St. James	N.D.P.
LAMOUREUX, Kevin	Inkster	Lib.
LATHLIN, Oscar, Hon.	The Pas	N.D.P.
LEMIEUX, Ron, Hon.	La Verendrye	N.D.P.
LOEWEN, John	Fort Whyte	P.C.
MACKINTOSH, Gord, Hon.	St. Johns	N.D.P.
MAGUIRE, Larry	Arthur-Virden	P.C.
MALOWAY, Jim	Elmwood	N.D.P.
MARTINDALE, Doug	Burrows	N.D.P.
McGIFFORD, Diane, Hon.	Lord Roberts	N.D.P.
MELNICK, Christine, Hon.	Riel	N.D.P.
MITCHELSON, Bonnie	River East	P.C.
MURRAY, Stuart	Kirkfield Park	P.C.
NEVAKSHONOFF, Tom	Interlake	N.D.P.
OSWALD, Theresa, Hon.	Seine River	N.D.P.
PENNER, Jack	Emerson	P.C.
REID, Daryl	Transcona	N.D.P.
REIMER, Jack	Southdale	P.C.
ROBINSON, Eric, Hon.	Rupertsland	N.D.P.
ROCAN, Denis	Carman	P.C.
RONDEAU, Jim, Hon.	Assiniboia	N.D.P.
ROWAT, Leanne	Minnedosa	P.C.
SALE, Tim, Hon.	Fort Rouge	N.D.P.
SANTOS, Conrad	Wellington	N.D.P.
SCHELLENBERG, Harry	Rossmere	N.D.P.
SCHULER, Ron	Springfield	P.C.
SELINGER, Greg, Hon.	St. Boniface	N.D.P.
SMITH, Scott, Hon.	Brandon West	N.D.P.
STEFANSON, Heather	Tuxedo	P.C.
STRUTHERS, Stan, Hon.	Dauphin-Roblin	N.D.P.
SWAN, Andrew	Minto	N.D.P.
TAILLIEU, Mavis	Morris	P.C.
WOWCHUK, Rosann, Hon.	Swan River	N.D.P.

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF MANITOBA

Thursday, May 19, 2005

The House met at 1:30 p.m.

ROUTINE PROCEEDINGS

PETITIONS

Ambulance Service

Mr. Ron Schuler (Springfield): I wish to present the following petition to the Legislative Assembly of Manitoba.

These are the reasons for this petition:

In May 2004, 46-year-old Peter Krahn suffered a heart attack while exercising in East St. Paul and was pronounced dead just under an hour later after being transported to the Concordia Hospital in Winnipeg. Reports show that it took nearly 18 minutes for an ambulance to arrive for Mr. Krahn.

The Interlake Regional Health Authority claims that 21 minutes is an acceptable emergency response time, whereas the City of Winnipeg uses a benchmark of 4 minutes.

Ambulance coverage for East St. Paul is provided from Selkirk, which is almost 25 kilometres away.

The municipalities of East St. Paul and West St. Paul combined have over 12 000 residents.

We petition the Legislative Assembly of Manitoba as follows:

To request the provincial government to consider providing East St. Paul with local ambulance service which would service both East and West St. Paul.

To request the provincial government to consider improving the way that ambulance service is supplied to all Manitobans by utilizing technologies such as GPS in conjunction with a Medical Transportation Co-ordination Centre (MTCC) which will ensure that patients receive the nearest ambulance in the least amount of time.

To request the provincial government to consider ensuring that appropriate funding is

provided to maintain superior response times and sustainable services.

Signed by Gerard St. Hilaire, Judy St. Hilaire, Claudine St. Hilaire and many, many others.

Mr. Speaker: In accordance with our Rule 132(6), when petitions are read they are deemed to be received by the House.

Coverage of Insulin Pumps

Mr. Kelvin Goertzen (Steinbach): I wish to present the following petition to the Legislative Assembly of Manitoba.

These are the reasons for this petition:

Insulin pumps cost over \$6,500.

The cost of diabetes to the Manitoba government in 2005 will be approximately \$214.4 million. Each day 16 Manitobans are diagnosed with the disease compared to the national average of 11 new cases daily.

Good blood sugar control reduces or eliminates kidney failure by 50 percent, blindness by 76 percent, nerve damage by 60 percent, cardiac disease by 35 percent and even amputations.

Diabetes is an epidemic in our province and will become an unprecedented drain on our struggling health care system if we do not take action now.

The benefit of having an insulin pump is it allows the person living with this life-altering disease to obtain good control of their blood sugar and become much healthier, complication-free individuals.

We petition the Legislative Assembly of Manitoba as follows:

To request the Premier (Mr. Doer) of Manitoba to consider covering the cost of insulin pumps that are prescribed by an endocrinologist or medical doctor under the Manitoba Health Insurance Plan.

Signed by Susan Erl, David Erl, Devin Erl and many, many others.

Point of Order

Mr. Speaker: The honourable Member for Portage la Prairie, on a point of order?

Mr. David Faurschou (Portage la Prairie): Mr. Speaker, I know the honourable Member for Steinbach was just over my right shoulder in reading his petition, but I was having difficulty hearing the honourable Member for Steinbach. There just seems to be so many conversations ongoing about the Chamber. I would appreciate if there was a little more decorum, please. Thank you.

Mr. Speaker: The honourable Member for Portage la Prairie does not have a point of order, but he has a good point. I think it is important that we do hear all members that have the floor. So I do ask the co-operation of all honourable members.

* * *

Mr. Speaker: We are on petitions.

*(13:35)

Pembina Trails School Division—New High School

Mr. John Loewen (Fort Whyte): I wish to present the following petition to the Legislative Assembly of Manitoba.

These are the reasons for this petition:

Overcrowded schools throughout Whyte Ridge, Lindenwoods, Linden Ridge and Richmond West subdivisions are forcing Pembina Trails School Division to bus students outside of these areas to attend classes in the public school system.

Elementary schools in Pembina Trails School Division have run out of space to accommodate the growing population of students in the aforementioned areas.

Five-year projections for enrolment in the elementary schools in these areas indicate significant continued growth.

Existing high schools that receive students from Whyte Ridge, Lindenwoods and Linden Ridge are at capacity and cannot accommodate the growing number of students that will continue to branch out of these subdivisions.

Bussing to outlying areas is not a viable long-term solution to meeting the student population growth in the southwest portion of Winnipeg.

The development of Waverley West will increase the need for a high school in the southwest sector of Winnipeg.

The government is demonstrating a lack of respect for the students and families in Whyte Ridge, Lindenwoods, Linden Ridge and Richmond West by refusing to provide adequate access to education within the community.

The Fort Whyte constituency is the only constituency in the province that does not have a public high school.

NDP constituencies in Winnipeg continue to receive capital funding for various school projects while critical overcrowding exists in schools in Lindenwoods, Whyte Ridge and Richmond West.

We petition the Legislative Assembly of Manitoba as follows:

To request the provincial government recognize the need for a public high school in the southwest region of Winnipeg.

To request the provincial government, in conjunction with the Public Schools Finance Board, to consider adequate funding to establish a high school in the southwest sector of Winnipeg.

Signed by Tom Fones, P. Veert, S. Noghianian and many, many others.

Minimum Sitting Days for Manitoba Legislature

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Inkster): I wish to present the following petition to the Legislative Assembly of Manitoba.

The background to this petition is as follows:

The Manitoba Legislature sat for only 35 days in 2003.

In 2004, there were 55 sitting days.

The number of sitting days has a direct impact on the issue of public accountability.

The Legislative Assembly provides the best forum for all MLAs to debate and ask questions of

the government, and it is critical that all MLAs be provided the time needed in order for them to cover constituent and party duties.

Establishing a minimum number of sitting days could prevent the government of the day from limiting the rights of opposition members from being able to ask questions.

We petition the Legislative Assembly of Manitoba as follows:

To request the Legislative Assembly of Manitoba to consider recognizing the need to sit for a minimum of 80 days in any given calendar year.

Signed by Atish Maniar, Veerbala Maniar and M. Sherby.

Introduction of Guests

Mr. Speaker: Prior to Oral Questions, I would like to draw the attention of all honourable members to the public gallery where we have with us today Mr. John Roozendaal who is from Vancouver, British Columbia, who is a guest of the honourable Member for Brandon East (Mr. Caldwell).

On behalf of all honourable members, I welcome you here today.

ORAL QUESTIONS

Post-Secondary Education Funding

Mr. Stuart Murray (Leader of the Official Opposition): Mr. Speaker, this NDP Premier's narrowly focussed goal of increasing the number of students enrolled at our colleges and universities is a simplistic, inadequate excuse for an education strategy. Manitobans being able to get through the front door of our colleges or universities is only one part of the solution. Once they get through the front door they need assurances that they are going to be getting a high-quality education in a high-quality facility that competes with other provinces in Canada, but because of this Premier's wrongheaded education policies, and because of his chronic underfunding of our universities and colleges, they have been forced to cut staff, programs and student services.

Does this Premier believe this is in the best interests of our students?

Hon. Gary Doer (Premier): Well, Mr. Speaker, the funding increase for this year at 3.5 percent for our universities is above inflation, and it is a higher increase in one year than the member opposite had in his alternative budget less than two years ago for this fiscal year.

On top of that we have funded by over \$50 million the affordable tuition strategy that we brought in backfilling those costs, and we have announced, Mr. Speaker, the highest capital investment in university history in Manitoba. We have pledged and we have flowed partial amounts of some \$50 million to the University of Manitoba alone. I would point out to members opposite the engineering faculty building, its roof was leaking when we came into office. There is a new roof going on it right now.

* (13:40)

Mr. Murray: Here is some simple arithmetic for this Premier. Misspending plus mismanagement equals mediocrity. Although he is satisfied and members on that side are satisfied to do that in government, we are not satisfied with that for our students in the province of Manitoba.

Each and every one of our students who enters our colleges and universities want more than just being able to get through the front door. They want more programs and services, not less. They want more high quality educators, not fewer, and they want better facilities, Mr. Speaker, not worse. Memo to the Premier: Universities and colleges cannot provide this to their students because of this government's tying their hands and chronically underfunding our universities and colleges.

The NDP has two options, either increasing funding or lift the tuition freeze, or, Mr. Speaker, is this Premier seriously going to legislate a rollback of the fee increases that he has forced the institutions to do because of his underfunding?

Mr. Doer: I have never met a Conservative government yet that ever funded universities at above the rate of inflation. This increase, and I am surprised a so-called Conservative government, I guess today is a spending day; tomorrow will be the tax-reduction day and that is why these flip-flopers on every policy have no credibility at all with the public because they stand for nothing, Mr. Speaker. They stand for nothing.

So, in their election platform, universities would get 1 percent this year, no money for capital, no money for research and development, no money for the functional food centres, no money for the new economy, no money at all, Mr. Speaker.

We have flowed money on capital. We have spent over \$50 million on backfilling the tuition fees. For students that need to get in the front door, we have increased the bursary program dramatically from the cutbacks received in the past. That is why there is a 40% increase in enrolments now in Manitoba, and that is why our halls are teeming with optimistic students.

Mr. Murray: Mr. Speaker, I know the Premier thinks that shouting somehow will solve this problem, but perhaps maybe he could shout to his minister who in one day flips saying that there will be no involvement in these student fee increases and then flops the next day and says, well, she is darn mad and she might get involved. Talk about the flip-flop government. It is on the other side.

Next door in Saskatchewan, they have implemented a tuition freeze, but they have also funded their universities by an additional 6 percent. That is a tuition freeze that makes sense because if you are going to provide the front-end benefits to the students, you have to ensure that you are funding it at the back end to ensure that there is quality of education being delivered. They are doing it in Saskatchewan but not in Manitoba.

This Premier's 2.5% rate of inflation increase is inadequate. That is why Manitoba's post-secondary institutions are implementing or considering implementing these backdoor fees, Mr. Speaker, because this Premier is tying their hands. When this government took office, they have seen more than \$2 billion come into the province. This year alone there has been record revenue increases. I would ask this Premier what excuse does he have to tie the hands of universities and colleges and only give them a mere rate of inflation increase. Why is he doing that to our students?

Mr. Doer: Let me explain this to the Leader of the Opposition because his facts are wrong, wrong, wrong. He should ask factual questions in this Chamber to have any credibility whatsoever. When you take—

Some Honourable Members: Oh, oh.

Mr. Speaker: Order.

* (13:45)

Point of Order

Mr. Speaker: The honourable Official Opposition House Leader, on a point of order.

Mr. Leonard Derkach (Official Opposition House Leader): Mr. Speaker, as you have cautioned us many times, we are all honourable members in this House and that indeed when a question is asked, it is assumed to be authentic, factual. All we ask the Premier to do is to give us a factual answer.

Mr. Speaker: The honourable First Minister, on the same point of order.

Mr. Doer: No, there is no point of order.

Mr. Speaker: On the point of order raised by the honourable Official Opposition House Leader, he does not have a point of order. It is a dispute over the facts.

* * *

Mr. Doer: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. When you take the percentage increase on the revenue side and you add the tax reduction of 1.2 percent, it represents an increase of over 3.5 percent. When you then add the capital investments and the postgraduate scholarships you have a higher amount of money, higher than inflation. When you look at the last four years between all provinces in the West and you look at the increases in investments and students here in Manitoba, we compare very favourably over the whole four years.

Mr. Speaker, I would say that we are dealing with the universities. We do want to maintain an affordable tuition policy. You talk about Brandon, I remember when I went to Brandon in 1999 the enrolment was way down. We are dealing with an enrolment going way up. We are trying to deal with the capital infrastructure.

If you drive north of Portage Avenue, I know it does not happen very often, you will see some construction going on at the University of Winnipeg, never took place. If you drive out to the University of

Manitoba, you will see the building cranes, Mr. Speaker, you will not see leaky buildings. There are challenges for the universities, but to have a 1% option for members opposite versus 3.5, plus capital, plus tuition fee backfilling at some \$50 million, we hold our heads up pretty high.

Faculty of Engineering Accreditation

Mrs. Leanne Rowat (Minnedosa): Mr. Speaker, the students and the parents and the university itself are very concerned about the promises that this Premier (Mr. Doer) cannot keep. Just yesterday the president of the University of Manitoba said the accreditation at the Faculty of Engineering is in jeopardy. What would be the use of the roof if the accreditation is not followed through on? Rather than threatening to use the heavy hand of government to punish universities, she should be protecting them. What action will this minister take to ensure the Faculty of Engineering does not lose its accreditation?

Hon. Diane McGifford (Minister of Advanced Education and Training): So we continue with this line of questioning from the party whose attitude seems to be do not do what we did in government, do what we tell you to do when you are in government.

Mr. Speaker, I have answered questions repeatedly from this member. I have pointed out the increases in enrolment at 33 percent. The increase in tuition revenue to the University of Manitoba alone is 40 percent. The Premier has pointed out the operating dollars. I have pointed out to the member opposite the work we have done for students. I know the member wants to wrap herself in the flag of student activism, but the students in Manitoba know who their friends are. They know political opportunism when they hear it.

Post-Secondary Education Funding

Mrs. Leanne Rowat (Minnedosa): We are wanting to get answers from this minister and she is failing to answer. She is flip-flopping on the responses. One week she is saying this and the next week she is saying this. I think we need some answers and maybe we can move on.

Mr. Speaker, rather than providing adequate funding, the Minister of Education has chosen to

threaten universities with heavy-handed legislation. When will the Minister of Advanced Education end the threats, start funding universities in a manner that they can support the growth needs of our province?

Hon. Diane McGifford (Minister of Advanced Education and Training): This government started funding universities properly in our first budget, unlike the members in that lost decade, those ten lost years when I think the total funding, increases in funding to universities and colleges was 7.6 percent, whilst in six years we have already increased the funding to 37.7 percent. I do not think the member opposite has anything to tell me.

Mr. Speaker, we are all familiar with that story of the end to the Manitoba government bursary in the dead of the night in the summer, by members opposite. Now they claim to be advocates for students. They should be ashamed of themselves.

* (13:50)

Mrs. Rowat: I think students, parents and universities would like a clear answer from this government on what they are planning to do.

Mr. Speaker, the president of the University of Manitoba said it is pointless to give an education that is not worth having. The Premier (Mr. Doer) promised students and parents that he would freeze tuition and provide them with a quality of education, and he has failed.

Will the minister today level with students and tell them her funding policy is compromising their quality of education? Why is she forcing universities to do an end run around the government's tuition freeze by imposing hundreds of dollars of new fees, Mr. Speaker?

Ms. McGifford: Of course, our assurance to parents, to universities, to colleges, to students has been clear in our consecutive budgets beginning in the year 2000: frozen tuition, steady increases in operating, \$100 million in capital, Mr. Speaker, and over 25 million new dollars for students' bursaries, scholarships and other initiatives.

We are proud of our record, Mr. Speaker. We are proud of what we have done for students, for universities, and we will continue to do this work.

Livestock Industry Slaughter Capacity

Mr. Ralph Eichler (Lakeside): Mr. Speaker, today the Minister of Agriculture has made yet another announcement and issued yet another press release. This minister is desperate and, again, confused. The last two years she has put out nine previous press releases about expanding slaughter capacity, yet there are no new plants being built or even in construction.

Mr. Speaker, how could our producers believe any new announcements from this minister when all of her previous announcements have yet to become a reality?

Hon. Rosann Wowchuk (Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Initiatives): Well, Mr. Speaker, the member opposite does not seem to realize that there is a processing plant that is on its way to being constructed in Dauphin.

Mr. Speaker, I would hope the members opposite would start to recognize and to put their support behind this project which is very important for the producers.

Mr. Speaker, I did make an announcement today, and I made that announcement that was developed in consultation with the processing industry. We announced that we would put an additional \$3 million to help the industry increase their slaughter capacity and we have made the details available.

I wish that the member opposite would recognize that there are facilities and processors in this province who very much want to expand their ability in this province. I would not mind if the members opposite would support this.

Mr. Eichler: Mr. Speaker, the equipment that she is talking about is full of dust and rust, sitting in some warehouse up in Dauphin.

Mr. Speaker, there has been nine government press releases over the last two years directly mentioning slaughter capacity. How many times has the minister announced that her new plan would do the trick and Manitoba's slaughter capacity would grow? Nine previous announcements, zero new plants.

Mr. Speaker, why should we believe the minister this time?

Ms. Wowchuk: Well, Mr. Speaker, the member opposite has finally admitted about how he feels about Rancher's Choice and the slaughter capacity that is being proposed for Dauphin. All these people have worked very hard. They have worked very hard to get the equipment to Dauphin and are working on their plan and our department and this government is working with them. All he can say about them is this equipment is a bunch of dust and rust. Shame on him. He should show more respect for those people who are working very hard to increase slaughter capacity in the province. Shame on you.

Mr. Eichler: If this minister would have done her job, the plant would have been running. We offered her a plan years ago and she still has yet to follow. This do-nothing government, in her press release, Mr. Speaker, plants like B J Packers, under her announcement today would receive 20 percent for upgrades as a provincial plant. In her press release, if they wanted to go federally where they could export the meat outside the province, they would receive 10 percent. How do you figure that? How are we going to export beef out of the province without federally inspected plants?

*(13:55)

Ms. Wowchuk: Mr. Speaker, I would encourage the member to read the announcement and look at what we have put in place. I can tell the member that this proposal was developed in consultation with the processing industry. So he may not like the package because he did not come up with the idea, but I can tell the member opposite that the concept of putting up to 10 percent into a federally inspected plant is supported by the industry.

I can tell you that the provincial facilities are very pleased that we are committed to putting money into their facilities because, as much as the members opposite do not like to admit that slaughter capacity has increased in this province, it has been those provincial facilities that have stood beside the industry and increased slaughter capacity. They want to do more. We are standing with them, Mr. Speaker.

Livestock Industry Slaughter Capacity

Mr. Glen Cummings (Ste. Rose): Mr. Speaker, the cattlemen that I represent when they hear this debate

will either be apoplectic or totally, totally disillusioned with the actions of this government.

The Premier says think positive. The minister says, well, now, and her own press release says we now have application forms available. Two years after BSE, two years.

Some Honourable Members: Oh, oh.

Mr. Speaker: Order. I cannot even hear the honourable member. Order. We need to be able to hear the questions and the answers. Decorum is very important to the viewing public and to all members in this House. I ask the co-operation of all honourable members. The honourable Member for Ste. Rose has the floor.

Mr. Cummings: I appreciate that, Mr. Speaker, and let me make it very clear for the minister. Winkler Meats applied a year ago for assistance to expand. They have not yet had the courtesy of a response from this government, and they wonder why we say this is a do-nothing government. Would she now commit to work with the industry?

Hon. Rosann Wowchuk (Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Initiatives): Mr. Speaker, this government has made a commitment to the industry. We have been working with the industry and we will continue to work with the industry. There was money available for feasibility studies from the time that BSE hit this province.

Mr. Speaker, we have enhanced that money. We enhanced it by offering to pay 90 percent of the feasibility studies. Today I raised that amount from \$45,000 to \$180,000 to cover off four stages of feasibility studies. I can tell the members opposite they may not like the programs, but this package was negotiated in discussion with Manitoba meat processors. Manitoba meat processors are pleased with the package and they have indicated that this will help them move forward, whether it be to enhance their provincial facilities or move forward to federally inspected plants.

Mr. Cummings: Mr. Speaker, that is the exact frustration on this side of the House and with the cattlemen across this province. From day one they have been pleading with this government to take positive action and move this agenda forward. Now,

on the second anniversary of BSE, we have a press release that says we now have forms available.

We congratulate the minister for working with the industry, but what about the cows that are not being moved into processing position in this province. They are going to Alberta. *[interjection]* There is the attitude of this government, Mr. Speaker. They do not even know how to imitate the sound of a cow.

An Honourable Member: Everything is a joke.

Mr. Speaker: Order. The honourable member from Ste. Rose has the floor.

* (14:00)

Mr. Cummings: Mr. Speaker, there are young ranchers out there who will be lost to this industry forever and part of it is the fault of this government for not moving forward. Will she commit today to sit down with those who have applications in place and move forward?

Ms. Wowchuk: Mr. Speaker, there have been discussions with all people who have put applications in. If the member opposite has some indication of someone, and he has indicated Winkler Meats, I will check on that application and I will verify for the member where that application is.

I can tell the members opposite that we have been working with the industry and we have been working with their association, and the association has identified areas where there can be further support. That is why we have made the changes to the program. That is why we have made additional support. I want the members opposite not to imply that there has not been a program in place. There has been money for feasibility studies from the time that we announced that we wanted to increase slaughter capacity. We have staff working on it and we will continue to work on it.

Mr. Cummings: Mr. Speaker, I heard the minister clearly say that there has been money for feasibility studies. How long can you study the feasibility of the fact that Manitoba has a surplus of beef that needs to be processed on a federal plan so it can leave this province? We cannot eat our way out of this beef reserve that we have. The jobs and the livestock will leave this province.

I want this minister to put on the record today that she will immediately take action to approach the industry that she can put into place support dollars, and will she also commit today to the fact that this industry needs infrastructure dollars to deal with the waste. That has been totally ignored in their announcement.

Ms. Wowchuk: Mr. Speaker, the member opposite is absolutely wrong. He is saying we have not worked with them. I can tell the member opposite that we have worked. We did the provincial feasibility study to get the data of all the animals that were in this province. That was done by the Province for the producers, but I am sure the member knows full well that if somebody is proposing a plant they have to do some feasibility study about their own facility. We have made money available for them.

The member opposite is not right when he is saying that there is not money for water and sewer. This is a significant announcement here. It is developed with the industry, and the industry is happy with this announcement. If there has to be further changes made we will work with them. I would encourage the members opposite, rather than be critical, to start to show some support for the beef industry in this province.

Adoptions Contact with Siblings

Mrs. Mavis Taillieu (Morris): Mr. Speaker, four siblings in Manitoba were taken into care under Child and Family Services. Two are presently adopted, one is a permanent ward and one is currently in foster care looking to be adopted soon. An openness agreement ensuring these siblings would have contact with each other after adoptions were completed was not signed, and one of the adoptions was finalized. What is the minister doing to ensure siblings taken into care can contact or spend time with their other siblings after adoption?

Hon. Christine Melnick (Minister of Family Services and Housing): Mr. Speaker, this is not the first time that the member from Morris has brought casework to the floor of the House. It is extremely inappropriate. My door is always open for discussion with any member of this House where there are concerns. When people are going through difficulties in their family life, it is very important that we all

respect that and we do not use that in an opportunistic way to score cheap political points.

Mrs. Taillieu: Well, Mr. Speaker, the inaction of this minister has caused this to come to the floor. The person who came to me said, "Please raise it in the House. I am tired of asking questions and tired of asking for meetings." These four children, the children's therapist said it would be in the best interests of the children to be in close contact with each other. The former Children's Advocate, Janet Mirwaldt, said it was in the children's best interest to have sibling contact. Yet the minister has condoned the exile of one of his brothers from the three other siblings. The upheaval within the Family Services Department has caused there to be no openness agreement signed, and therefore these children have fallen through the cracks.

Will the minister commit today to ensure that all siblings have access to each other and their cultural roots after they are adopted?

Ms. Melnick: Mr. Speaker, not only does the member bring inappropriate casework onto the floor of the House, she also inappropriately represents what would be the focus for people who are dealing with a situation in this way. I know that when situations like this arise that there is deep concern and that we try to work through the department, through all of the stakeholders in a way that will best resolve things in the interests of the children.

Again, I have to say it is inappropriate to bring casework onto the floor of the House. If this member or any other member would like to discuss a situation with me then I would be happy to do so, but I do not think it is right to expose individuals who are going through difficult times on the floor of this House.

Mr. Speaker: Order.

Point of Order

Mr. Speaker: The honourable Official Opposition House Leader, on a point of order.

Mr. Leonard Derkach (Official Opposition House Leader): Yes, Mr. Speaker, on a point of order, because this has become annoying not only for members of this Chamber, but indeed for people in this province.

Mr. Speaker, we can bring questions forward on policy. That is exactly what this question is. The question is whether or not children have access to their cultural roots and to other siblings of the family. That is the question.

Every time this minister stands up in her place, she finds a way to say that the question is inappropriate and sits down in her place without answering it. I am going to ask this Premier (Mr. Doer) to ensure that his ministers become accountable for the departments they have and answer questions to the public of Manitoba as they should in Question Period, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker: The honourable Government House Leader, on the same point of order.

Hon. Gord Mackintosh (Government House Leader): Mr. Speaker, clearly that is merely an interruption. In fact, to use the member's words—

Some Honourable Members: Oh, oh.

Mr. Speaker: Order.

Mr. Mackintosh: Mr. Speaker, this interruption, well, to use the words of the member opposite, an annoyance is not a point of order. What the member was doing is interrupting.

I think a very valid point, however, that the minister made is that individual casework, issues that are affecting families, if they are to be dealt with in a way that has integrity and respect for the parties involved and for the children involved, they should be dealt with in a way where there can be remedies through the department. Meetings are available. The minister says her door is open. That is the appropriate way, Mr. Speaker.

I think it is unfortunate that the members opposite seem to think that that is an effective way of dealing with certain family, individual, singular issues.

Mr. Speaker: The honourable Member for River Heights, on the same point of order.

Hon. Jon Gerrard (River Heights): Mr. Speaker, just a few words on this point of order, which is actually quite an important one. I think that what we are seeing is a situation where there is a very high

level of frustration in being able to get appropriate answers on a variety of subjects, and that is something that we have been experiencing as well as the members of the Conservative Party.

There are times very clearly where it is appropriate to bring up individual instances where they illustrate a larger problem and where there has been appropriate permission, as I understand that there has been in this circumstance, to bring this forward because there has been frustration in getting this dealt with appropriately in the normal course of events.

So, what I would suggest to you, Mr. Speaker, is that you look at this very carefully because it really reflects an extraordinary level of frustration in being able to get useful answers and action from the government.

Mr. Speaker: The honourable Member for Morris, on the same point of order?

The honourable Official Opposition House Leader, on the same point of order?

* (14:10)

Mr. Derkach: Yes, Mr. Speaker, just further to the same point of order. The reason that the individual case was used as an example is because this person who raised this issue has repeatedly gone to the department and has been refused access to the information and to answers. It is in frustration that this Manitoban has come forward and asked about the policies of this government as they relate to those issues. That is what the question was about.

Mr. Speaker, I know that in agreement with this House, with the House leaders, we have agreed that we can give latitude to the answers and to the questions because we have put a time frame around the question asked. We said that we would not raise *Beauchesne* 417 in the spirit that there is some co-operation in this House. But *Beauchesne* 417 very explicitly says that answers should be brief, but more importantly, deal with the matter raised and should not provoke debate.

Mr. Speaker, if there is anything that we take out of this is that we should at least answer questions as briefly as possible and make sure that they relate to the matter raised, rather than say if you have an issue

with this matter come to my office and we will discuss it. That is not appropriate.

We are asking for the minister to come forward and answer the question, and it is in that spirit that I ask the Premier of this province (Mr. Doer) to instruct his ministers to stop obstructing justice and stop obstructing the matters that are raised in this House and make sure that his ministers do answer the questions, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker: Order. On the point of order, I heard two issues raised. On the point of order raised by the Official Opposition House Leader, I heard two issues raised. First was the question whether there is dispute if the question was in order. All questions that are brought to the House, whether they are pertaining to what one might consider casework, are in order, and I will continue ruling them in order.

The other issue that I heard was about ministers not responding directly to a question. My interpretation of that is that the question was on the individual case, and the response I heard from the minister was replying pertaining to the individual case that the honourable member raised.

It might not be the answer that members perceived, but if the issue is raised and the minister is giving her version of the answer, I am not going to be judge and jury over departments. I will never pretend to know all departments when questions are raised on an issue and the minister is speaking to that issue. That is the answer that I have to accept. I cannot be judge and jury over if the answer is right on target or if it is not accurate, because I accept all information that is brought into the House by all honourable members as facts, and also, in our rule, members may raise a question but members cannot insist upon an answer.

I rule that the honourable member does not have a point of order.

Point of Order

Mr. Speaker: The honourable Official Opposition House Leader, on a new point of order.

Mr. Derkach: Mr. Speaker, *Beauchesne* 417, which we are going to have to start using again, obviously, says that answers to questions should deal with the

matter raised and should not provoke debate. It is on this basis that I raise this matter.

The question that was asked, and I would ask you to review Hansard, Mr. Speaker, was with regard to policy in terms of access to siblings and access to cultural roots. That was the basis of the question. The issue of the family was the example raised in the context of the question.

Mr. Speaker, it is for this reason that I raise this point of order because, clearly, the minister is stonewalling and refusing to answer a policy question. If it were an individual case, I would accept the fact that in fact it was inappropriate for us to bring an individual case here without having addressed it with the minister. This was a question on policy, and that is why the House, in my view, is offended by what the minister is doing in this Chamber.

Mr. Speaker: The honourable Government House Leader, on the same point of order.

Mr. Mackintosh: Well, Mr. Speaker, first, in terms of whether there is a point of order, a point of order is raised to draw the attention of the House to a departure from the rules, and I am not hearing of a rule that is alleged to have been breached. This does not appear to be a matter of order.

What it is is a dispute as to whether the minister's question is proper or otherwise, Mr. Speaker. That is a matter for debate at some other time. It is a matter for the public to make decisions about, but *Beauchesne* makes it very clear that no answer can be insisted on.

When it comes to raising particular casework in the House, there can be often very serious questions of privacy, particularly when we are talking about children. But if there is a specific case that a member wants a solution rallied for, surely it is best to bring the casework to the attention of the minister by way of correspondence or a meeting. She says she has an open-door policy, Mr. Speaker, as I know we all do, but surely that is the most efficacious way to deal with a particular matter of casework.

I think privacy, though, has to be a very serious consideration for members opposite as I know members on this side have privacy, particularly of families and families that may be facing challenges.

When it involves children, I think we should be very cognizant of that concern.

Mr. Speaker: The honourable Member for Inkster, on the same point of order?

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Inkster): Yes, on the same point of order, Mr. Speaker. We would recognize within the Liberal Party that there is an agreement that is in place in regard to Question Periods, questions, how they can be asked and how ministers can do whatever it is that they, in essence, want for their answers.

What we do request of the government is to get a sense of the level of frustration that opposition has when we time and time again put a question forward, and we are, in essence, being shut down from being able to have any sort of legitimate response. We are shut out to having any sort of legitimate response.

It causes a great deal of frustration, and I think that is why we are in the position that we are in currently. A member has brought forward a very legitimate concern in the best way that she has felt most appropriate and should not be criticized for doing that, and in fact is owed some sort of a response, Mr. Speaker.

So I ask the government, even though we support the agreement on Question Period, to be more sensitive to the frustrations that are being caused because the government is so off relevancy in terms of answering when questions are being put forward.

Mr. Speaker: On the point of order raised by the honourable Official Opposition House Leader, I rule that he does not have a point of order because the question that was raised by the honourable Member for Morris, the topic of it was being covered to the best of her interpretation. I accept that.

Also, pertaining to the agreement on 417, we have a written, signed agreement, and I am sure all members would want to honour that. If there are future negotiations dealing with that agreement that is entirely up to the parties and the House Leaders to discuss that. At this point, we have a signed agreement that we would not be raising 417, and I, as part of that agreement, honour all agreements that I am party to, so that 417 under the agreement cannot be raised or should not be raised until and if members

wish to change the agreement. That is entirely up to the parties in the House. I am only a servant of this House.

Mr. Derkach: Mr. Speaker, with the greatest of respect because of the insult that has been levelled on this Chamber, I have to say that I challenge your ruling.

Mr. Speaker: The ruling of the Chair—

Some Honourable Members: Oh, oh.

Mr. Speaker: Order. The ruling of the Chair has been challenged.

* (14:20)

Voice Vote

Mr. Speaker: Order. The ruling of the Chair has been challenged. All those in support of sustaining the ruling of the Chair, say yea.

Some Honourable Members: Yea.

Mr. Speaker: All those opposed to sustaining the ruling of the Chair, say nay.

Some Honourable Members: Nay.

Mr. Speaker: In my opinion, the Yeas have it, and that should take care of the matter.

* * *

Mr. Speaker: We will go back to Question Period, and the honourable Member for Morris has the floor.

Mrs. Taillieu: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, this case is an example of what happens when this minister's policies are not clearly defined or not properly acted upon. Will this minister ensure that policies are in place and are acted on appropriately so that no other children are denied access to their siblings and to their culture?

Ms. Melnick: Mr. Speaker, as I said in my second answer, the main policy that we work on is in the best interests of the children. That is, in fact, what we are doing here. On the issue of discussing casework in the House, perhaps members opposite do not want

to hear what I have to say. Perhaps they would like to hear what the former Minister of Family Services said on June 2, 1994: "Mr. Speaker, as the Minister of Family Services, I do not believe it is my role or within my ability to speak about individual circumstances and individual cases."

An Honourable Member: Who said that?

Ms. Melnick: The Honourable Bonnie Mitchelson, Mr. Speaker.

Some Honourable Members: Oh, oh.

Mr. Speaker: Order. In this Chamber, when making reference to other members in this House, all ministers are referred to by their titles, all other members are referred to by the constituency they hold, and I would ask the honourable member to correct that.

Ms. Melnick: Certainly, Mr. Speaker. I meant the member from River East, but I think it is very important that the former minister has said it is not appropriate to speak about individual circumstances and individual cases in the House. Members opposite may not want to hear my answer. Perhaps they would like to hear the answer of the former minister.

Point of Order

Mrs. Bonnie Mitchelson (River East): Point of order.

Some Honourable Members: Oh, oh.

Mr. Speaker: Order. The honourable Member for River East has the floor.

Mrs. Mitchelson: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. On a point of order.

Mr. Speaker: On a point of order?

Mrs. Mitchelson: Yes, Mr. Speaker. The minister in her zeal to escape from answering a policy question is quoting a completely different issue. Nobody would expect her as a minister, as nobody should have expected me as a minister, to answer a case-specific issue in the Legislature. This question is clearly about the chaos in her department and the policy that is not being followed. How can she stand up with a straight face and indicate that this child is not falling through the cracks when clearly the policy

that she has articulated is not being followed. She should stand up and apologize and answer the question on how her policy is failing and her department is in chaos.

Mr. Speaker: The honourable Government House Leader, on the same point of order?

Hon. Mackintosh: Mr. Speaker, I believe you have dealt with this. You have dealt with it twice.

Mr. Speaker: On the point of order raised by the honourable Member for River East, she does not have a point of order. This one is clearly a dispute over the facts.

Crocus Fund Payments to Former Directors

Mr. John Loewen (Fort Whyte): Mr. Speaker, to their credit, John Pelton and Laurie Goldberg have exposed the problems they found in devaluation of the Crocus soon after they joined the fund. Since then the unit holders have been left blowing in the wind while the Crocus Fund continued to spend their money cavalierly. Unit holders are demanding to know how much of their money was paid to the disgraced architects of this Crocus disaster, the former executives of the fund, Mr. Kreiner, Mr. James Umlah and Mr. Mike Dziewit. Would the minister please inform the unit holders and the taxpayers today how much has been paid to Mr. Kreiner, Umlah and Dziewit to leave and to keep quiet about what they knew about the fund?

Hon. Jim Rondeau (Minister of Industry, Economic Development and Mines): Mr. Speaker, maybe the honourable member does not know there are two investigations going on. The Manitoba Securities Commission is investigating to ensure the valuation issue and to see what has gone on with the valuation. The second one is the Auditor General is conducting a thorough investigation that the Minister of Finance and I continue to support insofar as to find out and get to the bottom of the issues, to find out what went wrong, to make sure there are recommendations, to make sure the system that was established before the former government is continued to be improved to protect shareholders. We are awaiting that report and we are looking forward to it.

As far as the financing, we do not run the business. We do not do the everyday management.

That is done by the board of directors and the executives, and we are anticipating the results of the Auditor General shortly. We will react and that information will become public.

Mr. Loewen: Mr. Speaker, this is incredible. This minister has had the Auditor General's report for two weeks. The Minister of Finance has had the Auditor General's report for two weeks. The Premier (Mr. Doer) of this province has had the Auditor General's report for two weeks. The only issue here is why this report is not in the hands of legislators and public today, and it is purely because this government is trying to hide behind it and delay and delay. It is a simple question, Sir.

This government has a responsibility to the unit holders. They have a responsibility to the taxpayers to stand up and make Crocus and its former executives accountable for their actions and to make the former board accountable for their actions. Mr. Umlah, Mr. Kreiner, Mr. Dziewit are the architects of this disaster. Unit holders have a right to know how much money they were paid to leave and to keep quiet.

Hon. Greg Selinger (Minister of Finance): Mr. Speaker, The Auditor General's Act is very specific. The Auditor General may submit a report of an auditor under this section to the Assembly if it is in the public interest to do so but must allow at least 14 days for the minister responsible, for the government organization and the Minister of Finance to review and comment on the report before finalizing it for submission to the Assembly. The 14-day period ends tomorrow. The individuals identified by the member opposite were hired in the nineties during that period of government when any kind of regulation was usually ignored.

Point of Order

An Honourable Member: On a point of order, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker: The honourable Member for Fort Whyte, on a point of order.

Mr. Loewen: Mr. Speaker, I believe all members of this House to be honourable, and I believe it when you tell us that the information they bring to the House, but here we have a situation where the Minister of Finance is completely contradicting the

Minister of Industry who told us just seconds ago that he was awaiting the Auditor General's report. The Minister of Finance now tells us he has had it. This government has had it for two weeks. I would simply ask the Minister of Industry to stand up and apologize.

Mr. Speaker: The honourable Minister of Finance, on the same point of order.

Mr. Selinger: Yes, Mr. Speaker, it is clearly a dispute of the facts. It is well known and it has been identified in the—

Some Honourable Members: Oh, oh.

Mr. Speaker: Order. The honourable Minister of Finance, on the same point of order.

Mr. Selinger: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The member cited no rule. He has no point of order. It is well known that the report that has been made available to us is a draft report. There are 14 days to comment as I stipulated in the legislation. There is absolutely no contradiction between what any member of this side of the House had stated on that. The member is abusing the rules of this House to enter into further debate.

* (14:30)

Mr. Speaker: On the point of order raised by the honourable Member for Fort Whyte, he does not have a point of order. It is a dispute over the facts.

* * *

Mr. Loewen: Mr. Speaker, I certainly appreciate your ruling. History will tell I have truth on my side, and that is something different than we can say for this government.

Mr. Speaker, the issue here and the delay in this report is, quite frankly, because the Premier's Office is so desperate to distance the Premier (Mr. Doer) from this file that his own ministers are not allowed even to answer the most basic questions posed to them in this House.

This government should be standing up for the unit holders. They should hold the Crocus board, the former executives of the Crocus Fund to account and demand that they provide the answers to this

government, to answer the basic questions that are answered in this House. Instead, it seems more important to this government that it shelter the Premier, Ron Waugh and the MFL from any involvement and any responsibility in this fiasco.

I would ask a very simple question of the minister who has unfettered access to any and all information from the fund. Will he stand up today and tell us how much was paid to disgraced executives Kreiner, Umlah, and Dziewit?

Hon. Jim Rondeau (Minister of Industry, Economic Development and Mines): Mr. Speaker, the member, as per normal, is confused about the facts. We do not issue the payments to any director or any executive in the fund. We do not manage the fund. What happens is we set legislation which says the parameters of the fund. We say where they are investing, how they acquire the tax credit.

In fact, we are protecting the taxpayers. We enlarged The Auditor General's Act in 2001 to ensure that he had the right to go in and investigate. We made sure they had unfettered use and access to the funds. The Minister of Finance and myself gave letters when requested, made sure they had unfettered access. We are co-operating. We have also made a commitment to react quickly to the Auditor General's report to ensure proper follow-up and improvements in the situation. We improved it in 2001, and we will continue.

Mr. Speaker: Order. We are on question No. 7, and question 7 has been negotiated for one of the independent members.

Remand Centre Northern Manitoba

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Inkster): Mr. Speaker, the need for a remand centre in northern Manitoba has been very real for a number of years now. We would like to see the government take some action in the community of Thompson in regard to this issue.

We have this bizarre situation where we have people that are transported from northern Manitoba, Thompson, as an example. They will come to Winnipeg, be housed in the Remand Centre, wait for a court case, go back to Thompson, and then after, depending if there is a decision made or not, they are shipped back to Winnipeg again to be housed in

Winnipeg's Remand Centre. It would appear as if a remand centre in northern Manitoba is not on the radar screen of this government.

My question quite simply to the Minister of Justice is does this government have any intentions on building a remand centre in northern Manitoba, in particular, in the Thompson area.

Hon. Gord Mackintosh (Minister of Justice and Attorney General): Mr. Speaker, when the member's colleague raised this issue back in February, I asked the department to advise of the volume of youth in the North who are in custody. There was a call from the Member for River Heights (Mr. Gerrard) to build a new jail in Thompson for youth.

Mr. Speaker, there were 12 youth in custody as of February 16. Now that number, of course, would change every day. Given that volume, we think that at this time investments would not be wise on such a facility in the North.

Mr. Speaker: The time for Oral Questions has expired.

Introduction of Guests

Mr. Speaker: Before we move on, I want to draw the attention of honourable members to the public gallery where we have with us students from Melita. They are the guests of the honourable Member for Arthur-Virden (Mr. Maguire).

On behalf of all honourable members, I welcome you here today.

MEMBERS' STATEMENTS

Joseph Teres School

Mr. Bidhu Jha (Radisson): Last week I had the pleasure of visiting Joseph Teres School, located in my constituency of Radisson, where I spoke to Grade five students about the importance of self-respect.

I was delighted that the principal, Laurie Sodomlak, took the initiative to invite me to her school. I had a very enjoyable time with the children who listened very attentively and were excited about the message I brought to them.

Mr. Speaker, it is very important that our children have self-respect. Everyone is unique and special in their own way. When children respect themselves, they will respect their peers and teachers as well. This helps create a safe and happy learning environment which is free of violence, bullying and insults.

Our government recognizes how crucial a safe and happy environment is to learning. This is why we have helped establish Safe Schools Manitoba and are holding a Safe Schools forum next month. We understand that keeping our schools safe is a collaborative effort. The Minister of Education, Citizenship and Youth (Mr. Bjornson) has worked very hard to bring parents, teachers, school divisions and community groups together to develop local solutions to school bullying and harassment.

Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank principal, Laurie Sodomlak, for inviting me to speak to the students at Joseph Teres School, and on behalf of our government I would like to thank all of Manitoba's teachers. They work very hard to teach young Manitobans self-respect and set them on the right path. My father told me once parents give love to children, but it is teachers who give them the gift of knowledge and wisdom. Thank you.

Manitoba Road Safety Work

Mr. Larry Maguire (Arthur-Virden): I rise in the House today to recognize Manitoba Road Safety Week this week, up to Tuesday of next week, being held in conjunction with Canada Road Safety Week across this nation. This national week is part of the Road Safety Vision 2010 which has a goal of making Canada's roads the safest in the world by 2010.

This week focusses on safe-driving practices and is timed in conjunction with May long weekend when traffic increases drastically every year. As part of Manitoba Road Safety Week, Manitoba law enforcement and road safety professionals will focus on preventing impaired driving and encouraging designated drivers, things like encouraging the use of seat belts, both for drivers and for passengers. Also, making sure that children are secured properly in vehicles and a fourth area would be driving carefully at intersections.

Too many people have lost loved ones, lost lives in Manitoba. The members on this side of the House

support efforts to encourage safe and responsible driving. We offer our condolences to those families who have lost loved ones. Unfortunately, Mr. Speaker, this Minister of Transportation and Government Services (Mr. Lemieux) has had over two years to bring forward his 2020 Vision of transportation in Manitoba. In spite of presenting an award of merit, almost a year ago, to the department members for their fine work developing the process, the vision report has still not been made public.

Mr. Speaker, Road Safety Week enforces several issues. It is simple. Do not drive and drink in regard to impaired driving. Do not risk your life or endanger the lives of those who share the roadways with you. There are several community efforts to curb drunk driving. One of them would be Safe Grad, instituted across the province in 1981. Another one would be Operation Red Nose that has come into being since 2003.

* (14:40)

Mr. Speaker many local organizations need to be thanked as well, Mothers Against Drunk Driving being one; another would be Teens Against Drinking and Driving, to name a few. I just would like to thank the law enforcement people across Manitoba in regard to all the professionals who make our roadways safer on a regular basis. Thank you.

National VON Week

Ms. Kerri Irvin-Ross (Fort Garry): Mr. Speaker, this week is National VON Week. It gives me great pleasure to rise today and thank the staff and volunteers of the Victorian Order of Nurses on this special week.

Mr. Speaker, VON is a national health organization that helps to address the health concerns of Canadians in many different communities. VON's staff includes nurses, health care support personnel, who are dedicated to providing the highest standard of care for the patients they work with.

VON members are also active here in Manitoba. VON members provide in-home nursing and support visits for clients, provide foot care treatment and assist in pediatric care for children. Additionally, VON staff and volunteers help in school nursing and community wellness programs, provide in-home companion services and respite care for the sick and

elderly. I am pleased to say that the staff and volunteers of Manitoba's VON branch work hard to promote community health throughout Manitoba. Nationally, VON helps deliver health services to over 1300 communities across Canada.

Mr. Speaker, as a testament to VON's commitment to promoting health in our communities, Manitoba's VON branch was one of the recipients of the 2002 Community Caring Award provided annually by the College of Registered Nurses of Manitoba. This award recognizes Manitoban individuals and organizations that have made a difference in the quality of life of their residents and communities.

Mr. Speaker, I congratulate all staff and volunteers with the Victorian Order of Nurses. Their commitment to Manitoba's communities is surpassed only by the caring that they show towards their clients and residents. I wish them continued future success. Lastly, I encourage all Manitobans to take time to volunteer with organizations like the Victorian Order of Nurses. Each of us can make a difference in somebody's life. Thank you.

Farm Family of the Year

Mr. Ron Schuler (Springfield): Mr. Speaker, many proud families settled in the Springfield area, and their descendants still work on the family farm despite the many hardships that they face.

This year at the Red River Exhibition, the Van Ryssel family of Oakbank will be named the Farm Family of the Year. I would like to congratulate Neil and Rosalie Van Ryssel, but also acknowledge Jeff Van Ryssel and Faith Chornoby. Together, this family works a farm that was settled by Neil's grandfather in 1908.

Mr. Speaker, that is five generations that have worked the same land. This is a significant accomplishment that should be celebrated, especially when the family farm in Manitoba is in danger of dying out. The Van Ryssel family operates a mixed farm with 140 dairy cows, in addition to 3500 acres of corn, canola, oats, barley, wheat and alfalfa. They were nominated for this award by the Dairy Farmers of Manitoba speaking to the outstanding nature of the Van Ryssel family's quality of their dairy operation.

The Van Ryssels are very active in our community. In addition to farming, among many volunteer activities, Neil sits on the Manitoba Rural Adaptation Council, and is currently president of the Oakbank Credit Union.

On a personal note, I would like to genuinely thank the Van Ryssel family for their many years of support. Rosalie, in particular, always made a point of coming in to help even during the busiest times of the year. Rosalie Van Ryssel is a delightful woman who is a valued and well-respected member of the Oakbank community and a tremendous support to the Van Ryssel farm.

Once again, I would like to congratulate the entire Van Ryssel family for being named the 2005 Farm Family of the Year. I am confident they will continue to succeed in the future. They are a credit to Springfield and are excellent representatives for our province. Thank you.

Sol de España Spanish Dance Group

Mr. Doug Martindale (Burrows): Mr. Speaker, I rise today to acknowledge a special cultural ensemble, the Sol de España Spanish Dance Group. The Spanish Club of Winnipeg is the sponsoring organization for this group. Their club is located on Selkirk Avenue.

Mr. Speaker, the Sol de España Spanish Dance Group is part of Manitoba's multicultural fabric. The dance group has entertained audiences here in Manitoba since it was first established in 1970. The dance group specializes in many dances, one of the most famous being the fiery flamenco with its bold, dynamic and colourful dance steps and costumes. The group has performed with the Royal Winnipeg Ballet and has also performed for Royal visits. Currently, the group consists of approximately 35 dancers, ranging from six to thirty years of age.

Sol de España and the Spanish Club of Winnipeg are committed to enriching culture in Manitoba. Sol de España has been an active participant in Folklorama since its early infancy and continues to participate annually at the Spanish Pavilion. The group is also well known internationally. For example, the adolescent group recently travelled to the World Folk Dance Festival in Palma de Majorca, Spain, in March 2005, where approximately 14 dancers displayed their traditional

Spanish dances. I am proud to say that Sol de España was Canada's sole representative at this festival.

Mr. Speaker, I also congratulate Sol de España on their 35th anniversary concert on March 5, held at St. Boniface College, where their performers put on a rich display of Spanish dance and music. I congratulate all dancers who represented Canada on their recent trip and also thank all dance members for enriching Manitoba with their talents and love of Spanish dance. Thank you.

GRIEVANCES

Mr. Speaker: The honourable Member for Lakeside, on a grievance?

Mr. Ralph Eichler (Lakeside): Yes, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker: Okay. On a grievance.

Mr. Eichler: Mr. Speaker, I rise on a grievance today to mark the second anniversary of the BSE crisis in Canada, to show that the Premier (Mr. Doer) and this NDP government's inaction have left Manitoba in a very serious situation of lost hope, lost opportunities and lost dreams.

Mr. Conrad Santos, Deputy Speaker, in the Chair

When the BSE crisis began two years ago, the NDP government made grand statements of assisting our producers and getting the border open. And where are we today, Mr. Deputy Speaker? No new plants. We have 375 000 more head in cattle than we had two years ago, and that is not counting the other ruminant animals. The unfortunate happens. With those other industries such as the bison, the elk, the sheep and the goats, it is very unfortunate this government has spent the last two years resorting to Band-Aids and press releases.

The only thing this government has done is to raise hopes and expectations, time and time again, only to leave Manitobans heartbroken, bankrupt, stressed and at a loss for what to do. Rather than continue to downplay the seriousness of the situation, it is really time for action by this Province. Under producer assistance, instead of providing a cash advance, the government opted to put Manitoba livestock producers \$70 million deeper into debt. Those loans are starting to become due this fall.

The government was quick to announce \$180 million in assistance programs after being pressured by this side of the House in order to do something meaningful for our producers, but it was very slow to spend it, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Depending on whose numbers you believe, there are still \$40 million to \$60 million of the original \$180 million unspent, and half of what has been spent of that \$70 million is loans that the Province expects to recoup plus interest from our producers.

StatsCan tells us the herd has grown by 30 percent, 375 000 more animals, for a total growth of 1.6 million animals. No new processing facilities, and the minister claims her fame to increasing slaughter capacity by 40 head per day from 60 to 100, hardly adequate to meet the real needs of our province. We need at least 500 head per day to make meaningful solutions to our producers within the province. That means there are almost 400 000 more animals that require feed, putting further pressure on our producers' pocketbooks.

In slaughter facilities, the NDP government needs to be pursuing every opportunity to expand local slaughter capacity. This minister has made announcement after announcement and statement after statement about expanding Manitoba's slaughter capacity and building Manitoba's slaughter industry. Two years later, there are still no facilities even being built or sod being turned.

We continue to hear news of more and more processing plants being developed, but none of this news is coming from Manitoba. Alberta, Saskatchewan and Ontario are developing plants.

An Honourable Member: And Québec.

Mr. Eichler: And Québec. Yet this NDP government is sitting back and waiting for the solution to fall into their lap instead of making things happen. Why is it the other provinces seem to be getting things done, Mr. Deputy Speaker? We have our heads in the sand. We keep making announcements thinking that something will happen.

* (14:50)

We talked about the meeting yesterday, in the St. Paul area, coming up just in a few weeks to open the border with a plan, and the minister is yet to even know about the plan. She said she would go if she

had an invitation, and I pointed out to the minister it was an open meeting. That shows how this NDP government is out of the loop.

We, on this side of the House, also offered a five-point BSE recovery plan. We released that plan last year. Had the government accepted that plan, there would be even greater slaughter capacity in Manitoba today. That plan, using previous in-house money that the NDP government refused to spend, would have provided real assistance to producers and real assistance for building slaughter facilities.

Provincially inspected plant upgrades such as B J Packers in Beausejour, Oak Ridge Meats in McCreary, have attempted to do their part. Many operations have tried to process a few more animals than they regularly have before. B J Packers has spent thousands and thousands of their own dollars. Oak Ridge went out and had the initiative to build their own plant without any help from this government, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Speaker in the Chair

It is unfortunate that our government did not take the leadership role, the road that would have been the easy road to do and had meaningful solutions to our problem within the province of Manitoba. Many have spoken about expanding their operations if they could only get some real assistance from this province.

The minister today tabled a news release similar to what she has done in the previous nine press releases outlining how her province can help build the processing industry in this province. Unfortunately, those nine press releases come up with a zero, and that is what we are giving this NDP government, a zero. Their efforts, however, are non-sufficient in meeting the real needs of the producers in this province. Their feet-dragging has been uncooperative with them so far, and, because of that, we have not seen meaningful solutions and expansions for our local abattoirs.

Today, after two years, finally one of our meat processing plants within the province of Manitoba, B J Packers, has finally got a meeting. With B J Packers, we are hopeful they will be able to upgrade to federal standards. However, Mr. Speaker, with the plan that was proposed by the minister today, as a provincial plant, they would receive 20 percent in

funding, up to a maximum \$200,000. However, if they would upgrade to a federal standard and export that meat, they would only receive 10 percent to a maximum of \$2 million.

How do you figure we are going to export our beef? We cannot eat our way out of this, Mr. Speaker. We have to export our beef. We have way too much beef for what we can eat within this province. Our federally inspected plants two years later, we still only have one, Winkler Meats. They have asked time and time again to meet with this minister. Today the member from Ste. Rose asked the minister whether or not she would meet with Winkler Meats and see if they could expand their operation and get rid of some of the glut on the market within the province. Her answer was she will get back to us. She will find out if her staff have met with them.

What kind of leadership is that, Mr. Speaker? We need a minister that is going to be dedicated to the farmers of our province and look after those problems of the province, the farmers of the province. It is imperative that she get within the loop and help the farmers now. We have less than five months in order to exceed and grow our slaughter capacity within the province. If we do not, it will be lost to those other provinces of Alberta, Saskatchewan, Ontario, Québec. In fact, they have said this is a silver lining. The minister and the First Minister (Mr. Doer) of this province said the BSE crisis was the opportunity to once again establish growth, a slaughter industry within our province. We have done nothing to see increase in our slaughter capacity within the province.

They say leave it to the NDP government and we will make everything happen. Yet they lose the opportunity by delaying their actions and doing nothing but offering lip service. Today the Canadian Cattlemen's Association suggests that Canada, as a country, will meet its slaughter capacity targets by November of this year. Where is Manitoba in all this? Batting zero. So unfortunate. We have offered meaningful solutions to the minister, and as we had said previously in our five-point plan, we would have slaughter capacity right here within the province of Manitoba.

It means that the opportunity to grow a slaughter industry here in Manitoba could be lost if we do not act immediately, Mr. Speaker. We need to turn soil.

We need to get the growth that has been required within this province. We need to get the minister onside and make meaningful solutions for our beef producers within the provinces. While the other provinces have been aggressive and offered true assistance in growing their industries, Manitoba has seen no new offerings. Two years later there are not even shovels in the ground.

With respect to Rancher's Choice, we support Rancher's Choice. Rancher's Choice is doing their part by purchasing equipment and trucking it to Dauphin. But this government continues to fail Manitoba producers by failing to provide the infrastructure needs of Rancher's Choice.

Why is Rancher's Choice having so much difficulty with their environmental licence when the Minister of Conservation (Mr. Struthers) is the MLA for the area? Is he not in the riding anymore? Is he not in touch with the constituents? When Dauphin was selected as a site for Rancher's Choice, this should have been looked after. Why are the Minister of Agriculture (Ms. Wowchuk) and the Minister of Conservation not working to ensure that this problem is remedied?

We support Rancher's Choice. But, unlike this government, we would also support plants in Neepawa, Winkler, Beausejour and any community in Manitoba that wanted to build a slaughter plant. Even one in Arborg was brought forward, Mr. Speaker. That was a plant that, again, has run into roadblock after roadblock.

It is unfortunate that this government could not have the wisdom or the foresight to grow the industry within this province. Today's announcement sounds great, but after nine previous announcements that have resulted in no new slaughter facilities, why should we believe this one will result in any new processing plants as well?

We have 12 000 families that have been affected by this BSE crisis, countless thousands affected in the spinoff industry, one job out of every farming job creates seven more, the countless millions and billions of dollars lost thus far. Government has pinned their entire hopes on the border reopening. Otherwise, it has been Band-Aids and empty announcements by this government.

We are two years into the crisis, and the minister continues to talk about doing things in the future. She says, "Let's study it." Even today the minister said, "Why don't we do more feasibility studies?", without having true meaningful solutions. We cannot wait for more studies. We have had plans that have been brought forward by meaningful investors within the province. We have had people that brought forward ideas that can do the business if they just could get through some of the paperwork that has been botched by this government. We are two years in the crisis and the minister continues to talk about doing things. That goes on and on.

Two long years, Mr. Speaker, for the crisis of Manitoba producers that is affecting the trucking industry, the livestock industry, the auction marts, and on and on, the car dealerships—I had a call just the other day from a tire dealership within our constituency who had not been paid by a number of farmers because they just did not have the cash to meet all their bills. I had another grocery store owner within my constituency that had been extending credit within the area of his retirement money. He had been loaning out money to farmers in order that they might be able to feed their families. We also had producers that had been using the food bank. They also had been using the clothes that had been handed down from people within the city, and we thank them for it.

We also have been through a terrible time in the time of agriculture with the drought two years ago and the rain last year. It has been a tough time for our producers within the province of Manitoba. Two long years of financial struggle, there are families that have been affected by this crisis. Two long years of inaction on slaughter capacity, two long years of false hope pedalled by this NDP government, two long years, two long years, two long years, Mr. Speaker.

It is a sad, sad day that we cannot be celebrating this crisis in an end. Instead, I stand this day in a grievance that we ask this NDP government to take action, immediate action, before it is too late. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

* * *

*(15:00)

Mr. Speaker: Grievances. The honourable Member for Portage la Prairie, on a grievance?

Mr. David Faurichou (Portage la Prairie): Mr. Speaker, in the number of years that I have had opportunity to serve in the Legislative Assembly of Manitoba, I have risen only two past times on a grievance. I am on my feet today on a topic to which I am very concerned, and my critic's responsibility is the reason that I rise today.

Yesterday, I brought to the attention of the Assembly the chaos that I see happening within our parks reservation system. This is the eve of the opening of the parks here in Manitoba for the 2005 season, and many Manitobans are looking forward to this weekend. Hopefully, with good weather provided, they will enjoy the long weekend spent in the wilderness and outdoors of Manitoba's pristine environment.

Many Manitobans were disappointed at the outset when the parks reservation system opened on-line 37.5 hours before they were supposed to, leaving many Manitobans disappointed because when they attempted to go on-line or by telephone to make reservations, found more than 1300 reservations had already been placed and many of the most popular campsites had been fully prescribed to. An error, a glitch in the system, as the minister referred to, but clearly a mistake regarding reservations here in the province of Manitoba.

These reservations are taken on behalf of Manitobans for Manitoba parks by a firm known as ReserveAmerica on-line. It is a very active and well-known entity across North America. However, it is not based in Manitoba. Manitobans have to be reliant upon computer banks in New York and call centres based in Florida and Wisconsin and California and Ontario to provide for reservations in Manitoba's parks. This is really disappointing to me as a Manitoban to learn that no Manitobans draw their employees for providing this valuable service to Manitobans.

Years ago, Mr. Speaker, the previous administration wanted to provide a 24-hour service and to engage technology and did, indeed, put on-line the availability of reservations to Manitoba's parks. However, the firm, the technology and the people that were engaged in this reservation process were all Manitobans.

An Honourable Member: Wrong.

Mr. Faurichou: They were employed here in Manitoba, and I am very pleased to see, I might note, that the Conservation Minister is listening intently and has stated that, perhaps, all my facts may not be correct. But I ask the minister to stand, and, since he has an opportunity, as any individual member of the Assembly, to stand and put on the record his understanding of the previous arrangement by the Filmon administration. Having said all of that, I will say that most Manitobans, in fact, I have yet to talk to someone that is totally pleased with the current arrangements for reservations here in our parks, Mr. Speaker.

The current way we and others visiting our province have to reserve a campsite in one of our provincial parks is we can go on-line and make those reservations 24 hours a day, seven days a week, but, Mr. Speaker, we have to have access to that technology. If someone was to be in the area of one of our Manitoba provincial parks and, spur of the moment decision, tried to access a campsite, they would be turned away, because unless they had cell phone technology with them that had the apparatus to be hooked to a laptop computer, they would not be able to make reservations or access the campsites because I will say that our campgrounds are not hard-wired so as to access the on-line services.

I believe that all of our campgrounds should have this technology available to them because it is there, and it is a service that I truly believe should be afforded individuals so as to maximize on any opportunity that we might have to see someone else take advantage of a vacant campsite within our provincial parks.

As well, one can access by phone the reservations to campsites in our provincial parks by calling Monday through Friday, 7:30 a.m. to 6 p.m. in the afternoon. Mr. Speaker, many of us leave for the office, and as my responsibility to the Legislature I would leave my residence before 7:30 in the morning, and the House sits until 5:30 in the evening. I look at this and I would have difficulty making reservations within those hours afforded. I express a high degree of disappointment that the phone call centres that take reservations are not, at very least, open until 8 or 9 in the evening and perhaps open at 6 in the morning when we can make those calls before we engage in our employments. That is only one of my concerns regarding our provincial parks.

Currently, our provincial parks personnel have been busy cleaning up our parks, attempting to get them ready for persons to enjoy the long weekend. I look to the budget and I am very disheartened, because this government has actually cut staffing to our parks here in the province of Manitoba. There are fewer persons there to provide for the maintenance and operation of our provincial parks this year than there was last year. Mind you, it is only one partial position and apparently it was vacant, but still that is not a direction that we want to see happening from this side of the House.

There are many more campsites being created and made available to Manitobans, and yet we have fewer persons that are available to maintain these campsites. Further to even having less personnel, we are dedicating even less money to providing for capital equipment that these parks personnel have available to them to keep up our provincial parks.

I will give you an example of how dated and unworthy some of our equipment is in the Department of Conservation. In fact, they have a boating safety program, boating safety. Our Department of Conservation was conducting that boating safety clinic, in fact, brought out to the boater safety clinic the natural resources boat. When they were doing the checklist that one has to do on the watercraft before it is deemed safe and water worthy, if you will, it was deemed that our own provincial watercraft was unworthy, unsafe. In fact, it had to be beached for the rest of the day and was not available for the water safety clinic because it was unworthy. That is the example of what we are asking our parks and Conservation personnel to work with.

* (15:10)

Now, I know I drew it to the attention of the minister. The minister did, and I will compliment him, move forward to have a replacement watercraft made available to the Conservation departmental staff. In fact, he allocated enough resources to have a new boathouse constructed and available for when this watercraft arrived.

Mr. Speaker, guess what? A year and a half later, after construction of this brand new boathouse, the boat has yet to arrive. I wonder, I really truly wonder, about the organization and the management of the Conservation Department as it pertains to parks in this province of ours. I do not know if the

minister was aware that the new boat to which he had promised and constructed a new boathouse for has yet to arrive. I am certain that he will be checking into it because the Conservation personnel, the natural resource officers, are really, really looking forward to having a boat that is water worthy, so that they can enforce the rules and regulations that have been passed by this House of Assembly.

Anyway, Mr. Speaker, I will go on further to give examples. In fact, the pickup trucks that are available to do on-site, in-park maintenance, I am afraid, Sir, if we were to order that these vehicles go before our vehicle safety inspection at any one of our authorized establishments within our province, I know, I know for a fact, that we would be taking numerous parks' vehicles off the road because of the maintenance that has been afforded the parks maintenance vehicles. I will not be specific, insofar as drawing direction to, because it is something that I just alert the minister to. I know he attends many of the provincial parks and is very, very aware, and has had first-hand experience to see the challenges at various parks.

In fact, the minister did state in the House yesterday that he witnessed first-hand the challenges of bringing Spruce Woods Provincial Park back completely on-line, if you will, and the challenges that were before the parks maintenance staff. I want to ask the minister, did he have an opportunity to look at the equipment that he has outfitted or provided to the parks personnel in which to engage their challenge of repairing and maintaining Spruce Woods Provincial Park.

I would suggest, Mr. Speaker, that if the minister did not do that, that he take the opportunity to revisit Spruce Woods Provincial Park to look at the equipment, right from the wheelbarrow, right on down through to the rakes and the brooms. I am certain that the minister will be wanting to outfit the parks maintenance staff with better equipment, so that they can more adequately address their responsibilities maintaining and improving our parks, because it is a concern. Many of the parks personnel are very frustrated, and would like to do their job. They take a great deal of pride in the job that they are responsible for, but they are woefully lacking in the materials and resources that are necessary to fully carry out their responsibilities.

So I hope that the minister is listening. I trust that he will take a look at the equipment, and maybe

take that pickup truck or two out for a spin, but do not go too fast, because, I would say, that perhaps the brakes may not be working. In any event, I do know and I will say that the parks staff is so dedicated that they engage their own resources, their own personal resources, to accomplish their responsibilities. When you see parks personnel that are out there using their own pickup trucks, their own four-wheelers, and their own tools to get the job done, and that is why I would like to take this opportunity to give credit where credit is due, and to acknowledge the hard work and dedication of our parks personnel.

Mr. Speaker, our parks are something that we should be very, very proud of, and we should continue to expand and to make available more of our provincial Crown lands to parks.

Mr. Speaker: The honourable member's time is up.

ORDERS OF THE DAY

(Continued)

GOVERNMENT BUSINESS

House Business

Hon. Steve Ashton (Deputy Government House Leader): Would you please call the following bills, Mr. Speaker, for second reading: 25 and 33, followed by report stage 22, followed by 35, 9 and 2? In accordance with an agreement that has been reached by the House leaders, I was also going to ask if there was leave to go into concurrence at four o'clock.

Mr. Speaker: Today, we are going to be going through Bills 25, 33, report stage 22 and then 35, 9 and 2, and is there agreement to go into concurrence at 4 p.m.? *[Agreed]*

DEBATE ON SECOND READINGS

Bill 25—The Workers Compensation Amendment Act

Mr. Speaker: Resume debate on second reading of Bill 25, The Workers Compensation Amendment Act, standing in the name of the honourable Member for Turtle Mountain (Mr. Cullen).

What is the will of the House?

Some Honourable Members: Stand.

Mr. Speaker: Stand? *[Agreed]*

Mr. Kelvin Goertzen (Steinbach): It is a pleasure to rise this afternoon to put a few words on the record regarding Bill 25. Certainly, I know that there have been a few other speakers who have commented on the legislation prior to me, and I think the bill has been the subject of some debate, both in the Legislature and also in the public forum and in the media.

I do want to make note at the beginning, Mr. Speaker, that the legislation has some good aspects to it. I think that has been recognized by members on this side of the House. I refer specifically to the issue of volunteer firefighters now having a presumptive cover for certain diseases that they might contact in the course of the good work that they do. We, obviously, on this side of the House have been pushing this issue for a number of years now with this government, and previous members of the opposition have done so in the past.

We would have hoped that the government would have seen the benefits of this legislation some years ago when the original presumption was brought forward for full-time firefighters, and we wonder why there was that delay. Certainly, we have heard from members opposite and from the minister herself that it had to do with a study that was undertaken. We are not surprised that the nature of the study has come back to show that there is a need for a presumption, but we certainly feel, and we feel vindicated, I think, in some ways that in fact we knew all along, that that is what the study would come back and say, because it is just common sense.

* (15:20)

Our volunteers and certainly some members in the House suggest that maybe it was just an excuse to hold off on this particular presumption. I would hope that there would not be such cynicism in this Legislature from the government to withhold that kind of cover for volunteer firefighters for a length of time just as a way to stall and to use this study as a means to put off what is otherwise I think legislation we all would have supported much earlier on.

We know there are many Manitobans who use their time as volunteer firefighters in our province. In my own community, the constituency of Steinbach, I can think of the Grunthal volunteer firefighter

department. Certainly, in Steinbach itself there are part-time firefighters. I think of the volunteers in the community of New Bothwell where my brother-in-law, in fact, is a volunteer firefighter. I hope the members opposite will not see that as a conflict as I speak to this bill, but if it is, it is one I readily disclose, and proudly disclose, Mr. Speaker. I know in the community of Kleefeld there are volunteer firefighters that are there to ensure our communities are safe. I think of the community of Niverville where we have a volunteer firefighter department as well. We certainly see that, in communities like the ones I represent, there are good people who are willing to not only put their time at an expense, but also risk their own well-being because of the kind of work they are going to do to better their communities.

I think the businesses who are involved in allowing these volunteer firefighters and part-time firefighters to excuse themselves from their occupation when the call comes should also be recognized at this time. There are a lot of good business people who would say yes, this might be a cost to my businesses and sometimes it might disrupt the operation of my particular business, but it is worth doing because it is a community service. If there are good people who will put themselves into that harm's way, then businesses will also say, yes, we are going to forgo perhaps some of the revenues we might have by having individuals working at that time by letting them go and do this community service. Those are individuals that need to be applauded, Mr. Speaker, and I think it would have been nice for the government to recognize their contribution earlier.

I have certainly tried to bring attention, in the short time that I have been here in the Manitoba Legislature, to this particular issue, and I am glad it has resulted in some impact on the minister and has been included in this bill.

It is important to remind ourselves that this is not the only part of Bill 25 of this particular amendment legislation. In fact, Bill 25 has a number of different components that are not as well or as unanimously received as those that deal with volunteer firefighters. Some might look at this legislation as kind of an omnibus piece of legislation that takes in a number of different components, some of which are easy to support, and others which are not so easy to support. Others might kind of reckon it to

a Trojan-horse type of legislation where the government tries to sneak in some pieces of legislation or amendments that are not very well received with those and under the cover of others which are well received. I think that kind of Trojan Horse approach is not one that members of the public would approve if they understood the nuances of how the legislation was set up, if they understood that there was another way. In fact, there is another way.

The pieces of the legislation which the minister would have quickly recognized as being non-controversial and not an issue of dispute, such as the issues related to the volunteer firefighters and giving them that presumptive coverage, could have been done under separate legislation just like the legislation that came forward for full-time firefighters. It could have been a separate piece and a parsed-up piece of legislation, and then there could have been a full debate on the other pieces within the bill. It is not too late.

I would reckon, Mr. Speaker, for the minister, and I am glad that she is nodding her head in the affirmative. That probably means she is considering this and parsing off the pieces of, well, there seems to be a conflict. Now, I see the Minister of Family Services (Ms. Melnick) shaking her head in the other way, so, perhaps, we will let them sort it out amongst themselves about which way they want to go. I would side with the Minister of Labour (Ms. Allan) on this particular issue and say it would be positive for her to take out the pieces of the legislation which she knows are agreed to universally within this House, and probably universally within Manitoba, to take those pieces of legislation out to separate them and bring them forward to this Legislature as a separate bill. I am sure if she talked to the various House leaders involved, there would be support for that initiative.

The Minister of Labour asks that I talk to the firefighters about it, and I am glad she has mentioned that. I do not know if she heard when I was saying that I had family who were volunteer firefighters within my own community. Certainly, I am in good contact with many individuals who are volunteer firefighters. That is why I brought forward resolutions to this House calling for this particular provision.

But I do not think that what the volunteer firefighters were looking for was that they would

have their particular needs addressed as well with a number of other pieces of legislation, which they really have no particular concern about or no particular interest in seeing, and do not want it to become muddled up in a kind of a political fight between the two.

I do not think it is wise. We see this on the federal scene quite often where these omnibus bills come forward, and there are a couple of pieces of good legislation buried in an omnibus bill that has a lot of other controversial issues within it.

I certainly recognize, and I think most members of this House recognize, it is a political tactic that is brought forward by the government. It is almost like a game of political chicken where they try to dare you to vote against the bill because they know that there are a couple of good pieces within the legislation, and the other controversial ones can just slip through the backdoor in that way.

We do know that in talking to, not just firefighters of course, Mr. Speaker, but members of the business community who have some concern with this particular piece of legislation because of what the provisions do in terms of including everyone under the Workers Compensation mechanism, under the Workers Compensation scheme, unless they are specifically excluded.

I know that the minister, in answering questions in this House during Question Period in the past and over the past few weeks, has kind of had a don't worry, be happy, a trust-me approach to this particular issue. She thinks that we should just blindly go into that dark night and trust her on this issue that nothing will change from the current scheme that we have now in Manitoba.

It could quite well be true that, if this legislation passed, immediately after that there would not be a recognizable change. But I think that business members of the community and others have recognized that it is not what the government does today, it is what the government does tomorrow, that they really have reason to be concerned.

Let us not forget that this is the same department and the same ministry under this particular NDP government that brought forward changes to the labour laws in terms of how a union is formed and taking away that secret ballot. Those are scars that

remain in Manitoba. A number of years after those changes were brought forward, the business people in this community recognize and are still concerned about what this labour agenda is under this NDP government.

So, when the minister stands up and says, "You should not worry about this sort of thing that Bill 25 might bring in down the long term. We are going to kind of take control of it. It is going to all be done in Cabinet by the Lieutenant-Governor and through regulation. You do not have to worry about it." Those words do ring hollow to businesses throughout Manitoba and to businesses, I think, throughout Canada who are looking at Manitoba as a place that is not very friendly to do business and is not a very friendly place to establish a business.

So it is one of those issues, Mr. Speaker, where we have a very difficult time, I think, trusting the minister on this. Certainly, I think all of us, in a sort of non-partisan way, wish we could have that kind of trust between individuals and simply take the minister at face value.

I suspect that while changes might not occur the day after the legislation was passed, we do as legislators have to look at the long-term ramifications of legislation that we allow to go through this House because certainly, at some point in the future, there will be individuals who will look and wonder how it is that we moved from a system of specific inclusion to a system of specific exclusion.

That is a key difference, I think, when we allow the government to specifically determine who is going to be excluded out of a system and to do it by regulation, to do it in a way that does not have that kind of specific light and glare of public focus that happens here in the Manitoba Legislature on most days, Mr. Speaker.

So we would ask the minister, I think, to go and look at a different process before bringing in this, I refer to it as Trojan Horse type of legislation, to look at a different process. I think she would find agreement from members of the opposition. I will not speak for my friends in the Liberal caucus, what their position might be on this. But certainly I think it would be worth exploring whether or not it would be valuable to take the good pieces of this legislation out, specifically regarding volunteer firefighters, and move that forward as separate legislation, so that we

could have a fulsome debate on the other issues that bring us concern, the other issues that have us giving some reason for pause, Mr. Speaker.

* (15:30)

I do know, when it comes to issues regarding Workers Compensation, I think that all members of this Legislature would agree they tend to be the most difficult type of cases or casework that come before our office. I know that there was an issue today in Question Period about case-specific questions being brought forward to this House. Certainly, I did not agree with the Minister of Family Services (Ms. Melnick) on that particular issue, but this bill deals with the structure of Workers Compensation in a global way. We know there are many other challenges within the workers compensation system. We see that as representatives, individual representatives within our constituency, when people phone and they say they have trouble with the Workers Compensation system. We look at that as an overarching type of concern. You wonder, as a legislator, when you have the degree and the number of concerns that come forward to your office what is happening with the overall system.

So, when we consider changing this kind of a bill and changing the way the system works, it has to be done very carefully and very cautiously. We have seen a number of pieces of legislation that have been brought forward by this particular government that buried the meat of the issue in regulation. I can think of other issues. I can certainly think of a number of bills where they have essentially become enabling legislation, and all of the important matters fall within regulation. That is not the kind of thing I think Manitobans would generally focus on. It is probably not the sort of thing they fully appreciate in terms of how legislation is passed. I suspect that most Manitobans, if you were to ask them not just about this particular bill, Mr. Speaker, but about all legislation, would think that it would be difficult to change significant issues in terms of government without going through a legislative process, without having either that committee process that we have here in Manitoba after second reading or at least having that debate on the floor of the Legislature. That, I think, brings greater accountability, not simply to the government, but also to us as opposition because it does force us to come up with a particular position on a bill. It does force us to have discussions within our own individual caucuses and with Manitobans at large in the greater community.

Those, I think, are valuable discussions and certainly valuable debates to have. As legislators it puts us in contact with those individuals who are truly going to be affected by the legislation that we are passing today and certainly in the future. So to say that we are going to move a lot of these decisions into the Lieutenant-Governor's Council, which, of course, is essentially Cabinet decisions, is worrisome for a number of reasons. It is not enough to trust this particular government, which has proven to be very friendly on the labour side and more antagonistic certainly on the business side. That is why I think there is a solution to this. It is not good enough. I challenge myself sometimes as a representative not simply to stand up and criticize particular pieces of legislation, but also to bring forward alternatives, positive alternatives, to the government that they could look at and certainly they could consider.

This is one of them, I would say, Mr. Speaker, that there is a different way to move this through the Legislature. I know that we are moving into summer at this particular time. Who knows when this House will actually adjourn or recess, but this is something that could be brought forward. *[interjection]* Well, the Member for Selkirk (Mr. Dewar) yells out a particular date. We are not so sure about that. Certainly, we have seen in the Legislature at the times—*[interjection]* I hear the Member for Flin Flon (Mr. Jennissen) talking about an agreement. I remember in the 1990s when there was agreement among the NDP about a particular closing date. They did not seem to think that was a good thing at the time. They went back on their own agreement. I believe—*[interjection]*

Now, the Member for Flin Flon, I am not sure if he should be called the Member for Flin Flon or the member for flip flop, but he seems to now say that he was not, in fact, in the Legislature at the time. He does not want to admit, but I would suspect if he would talk to his colleague, the Member for Selkirk, who is beside him, or the Minister of Water Stewardship (Mr. Ashton)—*[interjection]*

How come I can never get through a speech without a point of order?

Point of Order

Mr. Speaker: The honourable Minister of Water Stewardship, on a point of order.

Hon. Steve Ashton (Minister of Water Stewardship): The member opposite who is

speaking, Mr. Speaker, should know that members are described by their constituencies. I did hear him talk about the MLA for flip flop.

Mr. Speaker, as a northerner, I want to put on the record that Flin Flon is a proud community. I do not think the Member for Steinbach (Mr. Goertzen) should be making fun of a community that has got decades of history in this province and a Member for Flin Flon that works very hard for his constituents. I would ask you to have him withdraw those comments.

Mr. Speaker: The honourable Member for Steinbach, on the same point of order.

Mr. Goertzen: Certainly, Mr. Speaker, I was not trying to cast aspersions on the reputation of the Member for Flin Flon. I think I was referring perhaps to his memory a little bit more than anything else, but if there is an objection to the comments that the Minister of Water Stewardship found objectionable, I would unequivocally withdraw those comments.

Mr. Speaker: On the point of order raised by the honourable Minister of Water Stewardship, I heard the honourable member unequivocally withdraw the comments and that should take care of the matter, but I want to re—

Some Honourable Members: Oh, oh.

Mr. Speaker: Order. I just want to remind all honourable members that each and every member in this House is an honourable member and should be treated as such, and ministers are to be referenced by their title and other members by their constituency.

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Mr. Goertzen: I am glad to have given the Minister of Water Stewardship a chance to get up and rant. I know he did not have a chance during Question Period, and he needed to, kind of, carve out himself and get that all out of his system and now he has. He can go forward now into the long weekend being relieved that he has gotten that out of his system.

Mr. Speaker, the point that was being made, I think, was regarding agreements that have come forward in this House in the past. We, certainly, know that members of the New Democratic Party have not always kept forward to those agreements. I

think, when we were speaking it was regarding the ability and the chance, I think, for the Minister of Labour (Ms. Allan) to look at another way to move legislation through this House, and to look at a way to parcel off the contentious aspects of this particular bill that are before us, and move through the ones that do not have that same level of contention in a way that would be harmonious to this House, and that would benefit those individuals whom they are supposed to benefit, particularly the volunteer firefighters of our province.

I do not know why there would be such a great objection to that in this House, Mr. Speaker. Certainly, it has been done before. I am sure it has been done before in the Manitoba Legislature at times. I definitely know it has been done before in the federal House of Commons who govern under very similar rules as we do in this particular democratic institution. I think it would give some greater time to look at the true ramifications of this particular legislature. I know that the Member for Inkster (Mr. Lamoureux) has raised on a number of occasions the issue about how often this particular House sits. While I might have some squabble with the Member for Inkster when it comes to the particular number of days that he brings forward, I will not squabble with the premise of his petitions which say that we do not always have enough time to debate fully these particular pieces of legislation.

Here, I think, is an opportunity to ensure that we do, and can look under a microscope, under a finer sense at a particular issue within this bill which deals with the exclusionary provisions, Mr. Speaker. I know that the Minister of Labour probably finds some offence to this, that we will not just simply take her on her word on this particular issue, but I do not think she should be offended by that. I suspect that this is not something that we, as an opposition, raise just because we are in opposition. I think we see this as something that we would live under as well when we return to government, and members opposite often forget that we will be returning to government some day soon, probably within the next two years, and after that two-year period, we, too, will have to live.

But I hear the Member for Rossmere (Mr. Schellenberg) wants to talk about what is happening on the federal scene. He refers to the federal leader of the Conservative Party. I would challenge him, if he wants to run federally, he should run federally. He

will have his opportunity. Maybe, he will have his opportunity this afternoon, Mr. Speaker, to run federally. I would encourage the member to do that if he has such an interest in federal politics.

But, back to Manitoba politics, Mr. Speaker. I would say that there is a good opportunity for the government to realize that we are putting forward this suggestion, not because it would hurt them or hurt us when we are in government because we just simply think it is the right way to go, and it is the right kind of way to govern the Workers Compensation, not to have a general inclusionary clause when it comes to a particular bill.

So I do have a lot of consideration for the organizations that have raised their concerns regarding this legislation and wondering where it is all going to lead to. We often hear the term "unintended consequences" when it comes to legislation that has passed on a local level, on a provincial level, on a federal level. Certainly, it is incumbent upon us, as those who are elected, to look at legislation to consider those unintended consequences of bills that come before us.

* (15:40)

I suspect that this might be one of those areas, in particular, where the minister has not given full thought to the fact that having a general inclusionary clause with Workers Compensation, and taking away the legislative power to determine who falls under that particular provision, and removing it and putting it squarely into the hands of Cabinet is one of those areas where unintended consequences could, certainly, come forward.

She has the opportunity, I think, here today. I would not expect that she would have herself ready for this within the next hour and a half or two hours, but we are approaching a long weekend, and I hope that the minister would take some time there to look at a different way to move this legislation forward for the benefit of those volunteer firefighters who have waited far too long for this legislation.

I referred earlier to the fact that we do not think there should have been a two-year wait time for this particular piece of legislation, that there was no need to wait, on the volunteers' side in particular, that it could have been done two years ago. It could have been done in the absence of a study, because we

know that those volunteer firefighters are going to as many calls as their full-time colleagues, whom we also applaud for their work. We know that they are fighting the same kind of fires on those times when they are going out on those calls.

I suspect it would be a good show of bipartisanship by the Minister of Labour (Ms. Allan) to bring forward to this House a different way to move this legislation forward. It would give her, I think, also, the time for greater consultation with those in the community that have concerns with the changes to the Workers Compensation system. Perhaps she would also come forward with other ideas in terms of how to better the system.

I think all of us as legislators, regardless of what side of the House we are on, would like to see a Workers Compensation system that works to the benefit of all those who fall under their insurance provisions, and all those who find benefit under its system, but we do also know that there are different ways to ensure that individuals have that kind of security, that they have that type of insurance through their work system.

I put that forward, not so much as a challenge to the Minister of Labour, but maybe perhaps a friendly suggestion to her that this would be a way to move things forward in a way that we can all be proud of and we can all find concern with. I know that the members opposite have kind of wrapped themselves into the flag of compassion and caring on this particular piece of legislation. They no doubt did that with a purposeful intention to try to make it very difficult not to move this kind of legislation.

I find it unfortunate that they have not had that same sense of caring on a number of other issues, and, certainly, my constituents have brought some of them forward, whether it is regarding the insulin pump issue, in trying to find some amount of coverage for those who are suffering with diabetes, or those who are living in community care situations and have people at home.

I would also, of course, like to speak to some extent about the lack of compassion that this government has for those who find addiction within gambling and other addiction, but I suspect that if I did that the Minister of Water Stewardship (Mr. Ashton) would quickly try to call me to relevance, because I know that that is an issue that impacts him

deeply. He is extremely sensitive about it. He knows that he is vulnerable to those particular claims, because of his comments that he said in opposition. I will not move down that path.

I know that the debate of the Legislature will give me an opportunity at a further date or at a future date to, certainly, go and look at and explore the lack of compassion this government has on the issue of those who are addicted to gaming in our province and other addictions that they might be afflicted with, but I think it is relevant to talk about.

When we talk about Workers Compensation, and why it is that this government does not seem to want to provide compassionate care in a lot of other areas, and yet they try conveniently, and I think it is quite convenient for them to try to do it, to try to piece together two really separate pieces of legislation, two pieces that do not really belong together.

It reminds me a bit of a puzzle, you know, when you might take two particular puzzles and mix all of the pieces together, and then lay out all those pieces onto the table, you would quickly realize that they do not fit together. They will not really craft together any kind of picture that makes sense. In some ways, that is what this particular bill, I think, does. It does not show us a real clear picture, one whole picture. There would be another way to do it by moving the legislation apart.

I do want to commend all the volunteer firefighters and their organizations who have lobbied hard over the last three or four years on this issue. It is not something that they have an organization for. They are volunteers within their own communities. All of them have other jobs that they have to go to. All of them have other responsibilities that they have to attend to during the day. Yet I do know that over the last two or three years they have taken it upon themselves to try to push this government in the direction that they saw, and that we saw as one that dealt with equality and just simply the right thing to do.

I remember it was a few years back, probably two years back, speaking to a volunteer firefighter in one of the communities that I represent, Mr. Speaker, and he said very clearly that, while he thought this legislation was important and had that presumptive care for volunteer firefighters just as there are for full-time firefighters, he simply did not have the time

to put forward kind of a professional lobby campaign, although I think he would have liked to.

The other issue is of course he did not necessarily have all the expertise and all the resources to do that, Mr. Speaker, where other organizations might. But he felt very passionately about the issue, and I know he with many others has written the government and certainly I have gotten those letters in my office saying that it is time to move towards legislation that would fully cover those individuals who are on the volunteer fire brigades, who are out there every day and every week, putting forward their lives and really their families as well on the line as volunteers.

We recognize, and I think our party recognizes, that these volunteers bring forward an economic resource that we as government could not do on our own. While we are glad that there are provisions in this bill for volunteer and part-time firefighters, we do have concerns that the government did not bring it forward sooner and in the manner that they have now brought forward this legislation, parcelling it together with another piece of legislative work that is more controversial, one that is more difficult to support. It is a Trojan-horse piece of legislation. It is something that needs to be dealt with a different way. I thank you for the time and the ability to put some words on the record regarding Bill 25 and I look forward to hearing other presenters, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Peter Dyck (Pembina): I, too, would like to put a few comments on the record regarding Bill 25, The Workers Compensation Amendment Act. This bill implements changes to The Workers Compensation Act recommended by the Legislative Review Committee back in February of '05. I would say it only does part of what the recommendations were. On the one hand, Mr. Speaker, I see some very positive aspects to the bill itself, I also have some concerns, and I certainly want to try and bring those forward and trust that the government will take those to heed.

Mr. Speaker, I want to also indicate that last night I had the opportunity to speak at an awards night banquet where they were recognizing the work and the accomplishments of firefighters within the city of Winkler. These are firefighters who, on their own volition, and certainly they are paid as they go out on an hourly basis and fight fires, but they still do need to leave their place of employment and go

out and assist those who are in great need. I want to thank them for the work they continue to do for the city of Winkler and for the surrounding community.

The other part that was brought out repeatedly was the fact that they worked in consultation and together with the neighbouring towns. Just to give you an example of that, what took place was back in January, the town of Morden was having their 100th anniversary for, in fact, thanking the firefighters who had started on a volunteer basis. Of course, they went on and described some of the equipment that they had used. The hand pumpers were used. They used horses to pull these pumpers from one place to another.

* (15:50)

Mr. Speaker, at that point already they were talking about some of the hazards they faced as they would go from one fire to another. Certainly, a hundred years ago the kinds of fires that they needed to fight were quite different from what you see today. Some of the products that are used today have some toxic gasses that are associated with it, so, of course, the qualifications they need in order to fight these fires are certainly different today than they were a hundred years ago.

On the other hand, though, a life and the health of an individual was no different then than it is today. Consequently, in my discussion with them and being at the banquet last night, it was good to see that these men and women who are out there volunteering their time and going out and assisting those within our community who need it, of course, during times of emergency were applauded.

The mayor had the opportunity to give out 21 certificates to those who had passed the certification No. 2, and I am told that certification is the highest that you can receive. What had taken place was that they were given this education. They had taken this on in their own time, on evenings and on Saturdays, when they were not busy at their own jobs. So the gentleman, who, in fact, was leading the class and giving the instruction, indicated that they had done extremely well. He applauded them for their efforts. Certainly, I want to applaud them as well for the work they continue to do within our community.

Mr. Speaker, Bill 25, while it addresses and is looking at assisting the firefighters—and, again, this

was something that was raised last night, as they go out and as they are assisting they do not know the types of fires that they will be, in fact, fighting or the emergencies that they will be a part of. So consequently this was a part of the discussion they had in their preamble as they introduced and just before they gave out these awards. The comment was made, and, of course, this was made by some of those whose partners were involved in the department, but they were indicating that, when their partner left for whatever emergency it was, they had no idea where he was going, what would be taking place. The comment was also made, would they, in fact, be coming home because they have no idea what kind of an emergency they will be involved in.

There is this whole aspect of compensation. We know that there are times when, in fact, those who go out on a rescue mission do not come back. I mean, I see others in this Chamber here who have been involved in similar experiences and so you do not know what is taking place. You do not know what is going to be meeting you when you get to your location from where the call has come. So it is important on the one hand that we do consider the gravity of the situation, the compensation that would be involved, but then I believe that we have now combined this bill with a huge, huge bill. It has been introduced at a very late time.

I have a letter here from a group within my area who right now is buying the services of Workers Compensation. These are businesses. They have some grave concerns about how this will, in fact, impact them. They are looking for a meeting on June 28. I have to go back and tell them that I am sorry for the brevity of this introduction of the bill, for the short time that they have had to look at it. Again, I think the minister would indicate as well that this is a rather huge bill. They are somewhat sceptical because they do not know what the implications will be. They have called me; they have, in fact, sent out letters indicating that they want to have more time in order to be able to deal with this and express some of the concerns that they have.

So, Mr. Speaker, I just want to raise two of the concerns that they sent out and that they gave to me. One is the increased cost to an employer. Now, I will be right honest. Every month, I sign a cheque that goes to Workers Compensation for the people that are under my employ. Then I think back to the eighties, where, I believe, it was under the NDP

government, that they were running a huge deficit at Workers Compensation, in fact, I believe it was up to a \$200 million deficit that they were creating. Now, this was supposed to be a self-funded insurance program. Consequently, if you are going to be able to get the dollars to the point where you can actually, in a responsible way, run an insurance program, you need to have dollars that you can work with.

Right today, in fact, I know that the numbers are down from what they were when the NDP came into office in 1999, but it always was the intent of the government of the day to have a fund there that could be used by those who needed it, and we certainly do need compensation for those who have been injured in any way at the workplace. I have no problem with that. This is something that we need to cover. On the other hand, this money is paid into the fund by the employer, and so, with that, I know that there are also variances of percentages that you have to pay as you have different people or different sectors that are involved in the WCB.

For instance, I know that farming is on a different scale than is the industrial sector. The question they have is are these percentages going to be remaining. Again, they are looking at safety, but, when you look at the industrial sector, will that be a category on its own, or is there going to have to be backfill from other areas?

Now I want to lead to the whole area of the scepticism on this one. I know the board of the day, the workmen's compensation board, when the MTS Centre was built they put money into there. They withdrew money, which is employers' money. They withdrew that and they invested that in the MTS Centre. Now I can definitely share some of the concerns they have. I mean, what is going to be taking place, and what, in fact, is the government, who has the control of this fund, what ultimately are they going to be doing with these dollars? Where will they be invested? Where are they going to be putting the money? How, in fact, will this apply to the percentages that are going to be paid for by the employer? So that is one of the concerns they raise.

The other one, which is somewhat related to that, but it is the opportunities for employers in good standing to receive a rebate on the insurance rate. They gave an example here. This is interesting, and I wonder if the minister, as she has gone through this,

has looked at other programs. I am told that in Alberta there is something they call the Alberta partners in injury prevention program. I do not know if the minister looked at this at all, but this would be an opportunity to look at it, to make this as palatable and as acceptable to those who are going to be paying into this fund.

I know also that in the bill that is brought forward, what is going to be taking place is that this is now going to be opened up and available to, in fact, the way I read it, it is mandatory to everyone within the province. Then it is going to be Cabinet that is going to do the exclusions, that you may exclude such and such and such a person.

Where does this come in? So now you have charitable organizations that are going to be a part of it. I can understand they need coverage, but who is going to pay for this? Will they then go out as a charity, go and fund raise and try and collect more money so they can pay the dollars that are going to be needed for the compensation board? I mean, I am just taking this as—*[interjection]* Well, the minister indicates this is voluntary. So then the minister is saying she will then exclude them on that other side. This will be a part of the exclusionary package. Well, maybe the minister wants to get up. *[interjection]* Oh, absolutely. Oh, yes. Mr. Speaker, I will allow the minister to get up and put some comments on the record because she believes that I am misleading the House here.

I would suggest to you that when this is opened up to those charities they will be coming to me. Okay, she says this is on a voluntary basis, but they will come and ask for rather than a hundred dollars, they will say, "Well, please, could you give me \$110 because now I have to pay another \$10 so that in fact I can get compensation?" Then the other side of it would be we give that extra bit of money, and then we are going to be able to get a charitable receipt for this. You know, I think this has not been totally looked through. So I would encourage the minister to continue that. *[interjection]*

* (16:00)

Well, am I wrong that charities are not involved or not allowed to participate in this? I mean, that is what the bill says. *[interjection]*

Right, okay, the minister indicates that this is voluntary. Right, but on the other hand where are

they going to get the money from? Here is the other concern. Is this going to be coming then from the other employers within the system who are paying into this? *[interjection]* Well, unless there are apples that are falling from a tree that are raining money, the money has to come from some place. Any insurance program has to be funded and has to be funded to the point where, in fact, it is sustainable. Mr. Speaker, those are some of the concerns that we have with this. *[interjection]* Well, I had been on topic on this workmen's compensation issue all along but I wanted to indicate that the review committee recommended that the expansion of the workmen's compensation—

An Honourable Member: Workers.

Mr. Dyck: Workers, sorry, workers. I am sorry. Yes, I apologize. It is workers' coverage be gradual with a full and free opportunity for consultation and discussion. That is my point. We need to be able to have the full opportunity. This is what they are asking for, for consultation and to be able to discuss this. New legislation, however, states that there will be full expansion of coverage, as I have indicated, to all industries unless excluded by the Premier and Cabinet, and that is the point.

Mr. Speaker: Order. When this matter is again before the House, the honourable member will have 16 minutes remaining, and it will also remain standing in the name of the honourable Member for Turtle Mountain (Mr. Cullen).

The hour being 4 p.m., as previously agreed, we will now move into concurrence. The House will now resolve into Committee of Supply.

COMMITTEE OF SUPPLY

Concurrence Motion

Mr. Chairperson (Conrad Santos): The Committee of Supply has before it for our consideration the motion concurring in all supply resolutions relating to the Estimates of Expenditure for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2006.

The floor is now open for questions.

Mrs. Myrna Driedger (Charleswood): I would like to ask the Minister of Education what this new special grant for remoteness is.

Hon. Peter Bjornson (Minister of Education, Citizenship and Youth): I do not have the specific details on the remoteness grant with respect to criteria or anything of that nature, but I will take that as notice and get all the pertinent information to the member.

Mrs. Driedger: I appreciate that the minister says he is prepared to provide it. I would ask, if he could, to provide it at an early date. The information I took out of a rural paper clipping, it talked about this particular grant for remoteness replacing funds from the now-defunct amalgamation guarantee which is being phased out. My question, when he responds to it, is in the context in which I understand it from one of the newspaper clippings I have read.

So I would be curious if the minister, when he responds, could indicate if this remoteness grant is something that is available throughout the whole province or what the criteria are around somebody receiving it.

Mr. Bjornson: I will be sure to include that information for the member.

Mrs. Driedger: Out of another clipping from the *Brandon Sun*, there was an article written by one of the Brandon residents. He put out a question, and I wonder if the minister could tell me how he might answer this. The question this person wrote in his column was how can we judge in quantifiable terms the value of the education our children receive.

I wonder if the minister might want to take a crack at that.

Mr. Bjornson: Well, certainly, there are a number of mechanisms that are in place to assess student performance, student achievement. That is something we have been working very hard on with our partners of late, reviewing the assessment protocol that will be brought forward.

The member must know, of course, there is an assessment that takes place that gives us a provincial look at student achievement. That is at the Grade 3 level. The member must also be aware, of course, that we did have standardized testing in Grade 6 and Senior 1; however, we have recently been engaged in a process around meaningful assessment as the appropriate model.

One of the problems with the standard tests for 6 and Senior 1 had been the fact that there was less than 50 percent of our students participating in that and that did not give us a systemic look. So now what we are doing is making it compulsory to have an assessment model for the entire system, and we will have an opportunity to determine outcomes throughout the province.

The other tools that are used, of course, are exit assessment in the standard tests in Senior 4 language arts and math. Of course, we have committed more resources to the OECD and the performance indicating standards achievement tests, or PISA tests, which Manitoba has participated in, which gives a very good look at the systemic results.

Now, with the PISA, we have found that our performance has been consistently high in Canada, and Canada rates consistently high in developed world participants in the OECD program. The PISA results also have a value indicator which does indicate that we do very well for the money invested in our students with respect to the results that are achieved. The latest report from the OECD with respect to PISA testing has also indicated that the country where there is the highest achievement on the PISA results is Finland. Finland, as a matter of policy, has no standardized testing whatsoever. They use a formative assessment model, which is what we are moving towards with our middle years assessment initiative.

*(16:10)

Mrs. Driedger: The minister's comments about Finland are interesting. I wonder what comment he might have about what they are doing in Sweden, because they were not very happy with their education system, and there is a movement there to move towards standardized tests, because the public was not happy with the outcomes that children were achieving. The public was the one in Sweden pushing for better evaluation, better understanding of outcomes and pushing for standardized tests in order to evaluate kids. Does the minister have any comment on that?

Mr. Bjornson: Again, it is something that the department has been working on for some time now, looking at the entire approach to assessment. The other thing that is often left out of this dialogue is the fact that teachers assess and test their students on a

regular basis. Teachers are very much aware of what the needs are of their students as such, and that is why teachers are very much engaged in the development of the assessment model that is going to be piloted next year.

With respect to what is happening in Sweden, I cannot speak for what happens in Sweden and that movement towards more standardized testing, but again I will reference PISA results in Finland, which has no standard tests, had the highest achievement on this international indicator.

Mrs. Driedger: I will come back to this issue of standardized testing and assessment a little bit later on, because I do think it is really, really important to have a good discussion on that, but, before doing that, there are a few other issues I want to touch on.

Can the minister tell us what criteria are used to pick the schools that win Innovation in Citizenship Education grants?

Mr. Bjornson: I cannot speak to specific criteria, but I can speak to the intent of that program. When we introduced those grants, there was \$10,000 available, 10 grants each of \$1,000, the intent of which was to have teachers engage their students in lessons geared towards citizenship. We had a pretty significant application, I believe, if I am not mistaken and I can verify this for the member, I believe it was close to 70 applications for 10 grants. The criteria were based along the outcomes for citizenship education specific to the grades to which the application had been submitted.

We are very pleased with the uptake on this opportunity, and the intent is to develop a critical mass of lesson plans that can be shared electronically with other teachers to engage their students in a similar process. The intent is to have teachers who have received these grants to participate in professional development, so they can share their best practices with other teachers and, ultimately, to have a critical mass of lesson plans that support the citizenship agenda.

Mrs. Driedger: Is the minister fairly confident that there is no special leaning when these people, or the groups that apply, the schools that apply—is there any special leaning in choosing them because I know that, of the 10 grants that were given, 7 went to NDP

ridings? Is there absolutely no political influence in that decision? Who actually makes the decision?

Mr. Bjornson: The decisions were made at the department level, and I was advised afterwards who had been recipients of the grants.

Mrs. Driedger: Can the minister guarantee that there is absolutely no political influence in which schools are chosen?

Mr. Bjornson: There is no political influence in which schools are chosen.

Mrs. Driedger: A constituent of mine sent an e-mail, and I am just going to pose her question to the minister. There are about four or five sentences to this. She had just recently attended the Pembina Trails budget meeting, and she says, "At the recent Pembina Trails School Division draft budget meeting, it was brought up that our district lost \$29 million in assessment as the University of Manitoba no longer pays a school tax. The result is the taxpayers in our district have to pick up the loss. Why should the U of M tax loss not be spread to all of Manitoba, and why are we singled out? The U of M enrolls students from all parts of Canada and foreign countries. I would appreciate it if someone could give me the reason."

I wonder if the minister could indicate why it was that only the Fort Garry, Pembina Trails were the ones that ended up having to bear that cost. Her point is valid about, you know, those students come from everywhere. Why is it just a certain part of Winnipeg that had to pick up a significant loss and backfill that?

Mr. Bjornson: Well, each school division is based on a number of different challenges with respect to assessment. I know that there are some school divisions that have significantly high assessment per pupil, and some that certainly do not have that luxury of a very high assessment base. So there have been many measures taken to address this where such disparities exist, one measure being that there are equalization grants that are given to school divisions where there has been less of an assessment base. So, certainly, there are a number of other issues in some areas. If an industry that had been a significant part of the assessment base had shut its doors, then that would obviously have an impact. But the reality is that there are a variety of different assessment bases,

a variety of different ratios of assessment per pupil, and each school division has to deal with that appropriately.

Mrs. Driedger: Is this particular challenge, though, not quite significantly higher in terms of dollars that other areas might be challenged with, because this certainly was a significant amount of money? Was any thought, any discussion, ever had about whether or not it should be a broader base that ends up having to pay for this?

Mr. Bjornson: With respect to this division, putting into perspective, a quick glance at other city school divisions, the mill rates are quite consistent in terms of the individual mill rates that are levied by each school division. While I can appreciate there was an impact, the mill rate is not inconsistent with other mill rates from '04-05 that we have seen in other school divisions.

Mrs. Driedger: Well, the minister has to appreciate what happened with the Assiniboine South School Division. We were forced to amalgamate with the Fort Garry School Division where salaries were higher, where costs were higher. We had a very efficiently run school division where our taxes were not as high, and, then, with this forced amalgamation, Assiniboine South School Division gets whacked with a huge property tax bill that they have to backfill because we are now part of Fort Garry, which is the University of Manitoba being part of Fort Garry. They were put in the position of having to pick it up. Then we were forced into that.

Was there a decision made to force our school division to amalgamate with Fort Garry to make it larger in terms of spreading out where they can get the money from, rather than just affecting the Fort Garry School Division property owners?

*(16:20)

Mr. Bjornson: Speaking globally, I suppose, of the whole amalgamation process, there are a number of areas where we saw significant changes, first of all, in the number of divisions, but also in the number of school trustees, going from 443 school trustees to 309. There has been a significant decrease in the administration there.

There are a number of different factors that weighed into the decisions around amalgamation,

some of which were geography and demographics, and some amalgamation issues were a lot easier to identify in terms of parity in mill rates and things of that nature. The bottom line with amalgamation is the fact that, as I said yesterday, pardon me, as I said on Tuesday, what it has done is it has allowed for school divisions to offer more opportunities for their children. That is the most important objective that has been achieved by amalgamation, the ability of smaller divisions now to maintain and sustain programs that, as a small division, it would not be able to maintain.

Certainly, with the amalgamation, as I said, there are issues of geography, issues of compatibility in some way and issues of demographic patterns that would be a best fit. A lot of these are coming from the recommendations that were brought forward in 1994 with respect to which divisions would be considered for amalgamation. The fact that the research had been done in 1994 and we acted on it in early 2000 speaks to our will as a government to go through the process of the school modernization act, which was not without some disagreement, but again, the process has been a very effective one in allowing school divisions to offer more opportunities for their students. Ultimately, that is the main purpose behind the amalgamation process.

Mrs. Driedger: Respectfully speaking, the minister is blowing smoke. The review that was done was rejected because there was no sound evidence to show that forcing amalgamations would save money or improve programs. So, when the minister says that programs are improved, I wonder if he has any solid evidence to back making that statement.

Mr. Bjornson: After the amalgamation process took place, there was a study conducted where there was a lot of feedback from the educational leaders and stakeholders that talked about the benefits thereof, and there are many benefits identified in that study.

Mrs. Driedger: Can the minister, would he be prepared to deliver a copy of that study to my office tomorrow, or later today?

Mr. Bjornson: I will have to take that as notice. Though I have read the study, I do not recall the criteria around the commissioning of the study and things of that nature. I would have to take that as notice and get back to the member if indeed I can provide a copy to you.

Mrs. Driedger: Can the minister tell us what the name of that study was, and who did it?

Mr. Bjornson: I believe it was David Church that did the study. I believe it was. I will have to check on that, but I do not recall the name of the study. I do recall having read it when I first was appointed minister a couple of years ago. I do recall having read the study.

Mrs. Driedger: Can the minister tell us when it would have been done? Would it have been done early on in amalgamation? It has, obviously, been done before the three-year, post-amalgamation time frame, so what year would it have been completed?

Mr. Bjornson: I am sorry. I do not recall when it was completed. As I said, I do recall reading it very early in my tenure, but I do not recall the date on the study. The study had a lot of very favourable comments on what amalgamation has meant for school divisions in many ways, whether it was administrative, whether it was pedagogical, but the study was a very positive report that had asked for the participation of the educational leaders to provide feedback on the process.

Mrs. Driedger: Did the study also look at the supposed cost savings the government said they would achieve? Did it look at cost?

Mr. Bjornson: I do not recall that being part of the study.

Mrs. Driedger: Considering the NDP said they were going to save \$10 million through the forced amalgamation, why would it not have been part of that study?

Mr. Bjornson: Again, I can provide that information for the member when I have had an opportunity to take a look at the study once again. There have been a number of savings identified, as I said before, first of all, with the reduction of the number of trustees, putting admin caps on the divisions, a certain percentage that is allowed for administration, 5 percent in northern, 4.5 percent rural, and 4 percent cap, urban. So there have been other measures that have been taken that are realizing savings and putting the resources where it counts. Those resources are being redirected to the classroom, and that is the most important part of this process.

Also, with respect to amalgamation, we have seen some of the school divisions that have been

amalgamated have not incurred the same increases in costs in the last couple of years or increases in taxes that we have seen in other school divisions. There are a few exceptions to that, but on average the increased taxes for the amalgamated divisions are less than the increased taxes for the non-amalgamated divisions.

Mrs. Driedger: What I would say to the minister is he could go out and he could be saying all these wonderful things have happened, but, with all due respect to the minister, I am not necessarily going to believe him just because he is saying it. That is why I think it would be very important even for the credibility of the government, who cannot substantiate all of this other than just with rhetoric, I think it would be very, very important for them to be able to put out some totally objective evaluation. If the minister does not think that financial costs were included in there, then that certainly is not going to be a very good review, and very selectively done, I would suggest.

I will be looking to the minister for a copy of that. I hope he feels credibility for the government is important enough that he will be forthcoming with that report. I would suggest that is quite important in everybody having that fair opportunity to judge whether or not amalgamation has had the benefits that he wants us all to believe they have had.

Another letter that has actually been sent to the minister, and I am going to ask him for his comments on it, came from the Mountain View School Division in Dauphin. They have actually had, I think, an interesting suggestion. I do not know if the minister might recall their letter to him. I will, just in summary form, give him some of the information. They, probably like other school divisions, are becoming increasingly concerned with the issue of revenue cash flow and the interest that it is having on interest expenditure levels.

* (16:30)

In looking at their concern, they have indicated their school division has not had a positive cash balance since its formation in July of 2002. He goes on to say that upon review of this concern, it is clear that if the government were to consider changing the method and timing of revenue distribution, school divisions could save thousands of dollars in interest costs. In their '05-06 operating budget, they have increased their expenditure allocation for interest

costs to \$90,000. They are saying that reducing or eliminating this expense does not require additional money from the government and can easily be accomplished by simply restructuring the distribution method for provincial advances to provide resources to school divisions when they need it most.

Apparently, this division had presented a resolution to the MAST conference, the last one, and it was requesting that the government consider changing its practice to begin distributing operational advances in July as opposed to September. They said that this change would help all school divisions by lowering borrowing requirements over the summer months when divisions are forced to borrow significant funds to operate. In August of '04, their division was operating on a line of credit, borrowing approximately \$7 million to meet their obligations. Has the minister had any discussion with his department to address this issue, which seems like it might have some pretty strong merit if the government were to relook at how they are funding the school divisions?

Mr. Bjornson: Certainly, when our partners bring forward suggestions, we do take a look at each suggestion and discuss the merit of each suggestion. We do have a committee that looks at how we fund schools. We have partnering put on that process each time, and that has resulted in, among other things, declining enrolment grants, equalization grants and things of that nature.

With respect to cash flow, one of the steps that we have taken is we have dealt with the transparency of the property tax credit in the \$400 property tax credit where previously that \$400 property tax credit would be forwarded to the municipal government. The municipal government would then accordingly forward that property tax credit to the school division. We have eliminated that step, which will improve the cash flow for school divisions by directly forwarding that property tax credit to the school division. That is one step that we have taken that will improve cash flow and, accordingly, reduce borrowing costs but, again, with that particular recommendation, when our partners bring forward recommendations, we do talk in the department about how we can possibly address those, and we will continue to do so.

Mrs. Driedger: Seeing as the minister got this letter, it was dated March 10 of this year, can the minister

tell us what decision he and his department reached regarding this very specific suggestion?

Mr. Bjornson: Well, again, we will continue to discuss these issues. As you know, the education budget is the maverick in the whole budgetary processes. The announcement does come out in January. I can appreciate that the timing around that request had been in March, which would be consistent with, I believe, the convention time or leading up to the convention for MAST. Pardon me, with that particular school division, it would have been around the time of their budget consultations. Again, when we get these recommendations, we keep them active. We keep them on the table, and we keep discussing with our partners and with department staff how to best address these issues.

Mrs. Driedger: I appreciate the minister's comments, but he is avoiding answering this question. Perhaps he is unclear or does not recall where this might be at, but what they are doing is encouraging government to have a look at this and implement the changes so that they could reallocate interest costs back into the classroom. This seems to make good fiscal sense because, you know, they have increased their expenditure allocation for interest costs to \$90,000. That seems to be a waste of money to be paying interest costs like that. They have come up with a solution.

Would the minister, at least, be prepared to talk to his department about this specific memo that was sent to him on March 10, '05, and, perhaps, if he has even responded to it, to send me a copy of that response? I certainly think that there is good merit to what they are suggesting, because all they are really looking for is how to get that money into the classroom. They have come up with what seems to be a reasonable solution. I am just asking the minister would he be prepared to go back to his department and find out where this is at.

Mr. Bjornson: That particular request, as all other requests coming from stakeholders, is active as part of the dialogue around how we fund schools, but one of the steps that we did take, as I said, with the property tax credit, has improved the cash flow. It is a concern. We will continue to have that discussion with our stakeholders as we look at how we fund schools.

Mrs. Driedger: I am not very happy or satisfied with the minister's answer because he is not

answering what is a pretty simple and straightforward request from the Mountain View School Division who seems to have a problem with cash flow, as many of them probably do. They have come forward with a suggestion. They are trying to get their borrowing costs down. The interest they are having to pay, they want to reallocate that back to the classroom.

I am not sure why the minister is skating around this and why he is not prepared to say, "Yes, I recall the memo." But we know what his track record is in memos or in letters because he had one a year ago with serious allegations from a citizen about illegal land development in a school division and he ignored that. Is the minister saying he has ignored this one too? He does not remember this one. I know that he will get a lot of mail. I would suggest it is probably in his best interests to just say, "Well, I am not sure where this is at, but I do think there is some merit in this. I will go back and find out where it is at." Is the minister prepared to do that?

Mr. Bjornson: I do recall having seen that. I do recall the request, and yes, it does make sense. As such, it continues to be an active file as we discuss that and many other issues that are brought forward with the committee that reviews how we fund our schools. That is something we do every year, and is something we will continue to do. I will be talking to the finance department within the Education Department about this and many other issues in the not-so-distant future as we prepare for the next budget cycle.

* * *

Mr. Leonard Derkach (Official Opposition House Leader): On House business, I wonder if I could seek leave of the committee to have the Speaker assume the Chair to deal with a matter of House business.

Mr. Chairperson: Is there leave that the Committee of Supply temporarily rise so we can have the Speaker? Leave? *[Agreed]*

IN SESSION

House Business

Mr. Leonard Derkach (Official Opposition House Leader): I thank the committee for allowing me to do this. I would like to table the list for concurrence.

Since we have to do this before the next sitting, I am tabling a list of ministers required for concurrence.

Mr. Speaker: The list for concurrence has been tabled. We will now resolve into Committee of Supply.

* (16:40)

COMMITTEE OF SUPPLY
(Continued)

Concurrence Motion
(Continued)

Mrs. Myrna Driedger (Charleswood): I would like to now move on to another topic of class time. Could the minister tell us how many days of a year students are now in class?

Hon. Peter Bjornson (Minister of Education, Citizenship and Youth): Once again, with the decision to move to a post-Labour Day start, the calendar fluctuates. With 194 school days, less administration days and less professional development days, there would be approximately 184 days for classroom instruction. Of course, that will fluctuate year by year depending on where Labour Day falls on the calendar.

Mrs. Driedger: Could the minister indicate what that number would have been several years ago? Was it ever around 200 or more days of sitting?

Mr. Bjornson: There was a time when the calendar was regulated at 200 days. That, of course, included professional development and administration days so there would be as many as 190 days of classroom instruction.

Mrs. Driedger: Has there been any evaluation in terms of whether or not it has affected learning outcomes by having this decreased number of days that students actually learn?

Mr. Bjornson: There are two parts to that question, the first part being the ability of the teachers to deliver the curriculum within the times they are provided to do so, and I have absolute confidence in the teachers in this province that they are able to deliver that curriculum within the time they are given to do so. I know, as a teacher, there are lots of challenges around the ability to deliver curriculum whether you had 190 days, whether you had 184

days. Certainly, what this has done in terms of adjusting the calendar to a post-Labour Day start, it brings us in line with every other jurisdiction in Canada.

In fact, the only jurisdiction that has a 200-day calendar, from what I recall, is Québec. The province of Québec, having a 200-day calendar, it also includes 20 days that are set aside for professional development and for administrative purposes. So as such, they even have less classroom contact.

The main thing in this equation is teachers are tasked with delivering curriculum. Teachers are tasked with the time within which to deliver that curriculum, and teachers are delivering that curriculum.

Mrs. Driedger: I understand there was a northern school that was very upset with not having enough learning days for students. They were quite critical of it and did not feel that it was meeting the learning needs of students. They were looking at actually changing it. I wonder if the minister might indicate what the outcome of that issue was. I am assuming he was probably made aware of it. It was certainly in their newspapers, and there were some comments about it.

Mr. Bjornson: Could the member clarify which school she is referring to?

Mrs. Driedger: I do not recall the school. I did write it down as a northern school. Maybe it was Flin Flon or Thompson. I think it might have been Thompson. There was actually some discussion there and it was quite interesting discussion. It made the Thompson paper several times, a lot of concern by the school system that the kids were not learning, and they were looking at extending the number of days that kids would be at school.

Mr. Bjornson: Well, again, as minister, we set the calendar. We announced what the calendar would be for five years, and that is the first time that that has been done, so that school divisions can make better plans around their calendar years.

There were some people initially that I was aware of that were concerned about the abbreviated school year. But, again, I will say that teachers have the task of delivering the curriculum and they have the task of delivering it within the time frames that

are allowed to do so. I know that they are delivering that curriculum.

Mrs. Driedger: Well, I wish I had brought my file with me, and I do not think I brought that one. But it seems to me they were willing to perhaps disobey because they were quite adamant. Is the minister not aware of having any discussions on this with his staff?

Mr. Bjornson: The discussion that we had with staff around the school calendar is that this has been overwhelmingly applauded as such. The fact that we have extended summer essentially—*[interjection]* There seems to be some excitement about something going on in Ottawa, I am not sure.

Having said that, getting back to the question, there is—*[interjection]*

Are we having an unofficial recess?

Mr. Chairperson: What is the pleasure of the committee?

Some Honourable Members: Oh, oh.

Mr. Bjornson: Well, essentially, the fact that we have a shorter school year has been much more appreciated than maligned. The fact is that any fluctuations in the school year—and certainly we have had some unexpected fluctuations in the amount of instruction time, whether there are issues of snow days and things like that.

I recall when we did have a 200-day calendar when I was teaching, and we had seven or eight snow days. Did that impact the ability to deliver the curriculum? No, because you make the adjustments and you do what you have to do to get the job done. That is what teachers do every day.

Mrs. Driedger: I should indicate that sometimes there really is good camaraderie in the House. We have got a whole group, we have got Liberals and NDP and Conservatives, all huddled together very co-operatively.

So I would like to ask the minister about the public school funding and school board taxation report that was done and that appears to have been shelved by the minister. I wonder where that particular report is.

Mr. Bjornson: One thing that was very immediately clear by the stakeholders that had submitted minority reports, the stakeholders that agreed to disagree, was that the issue of education funding is not an easy issue to resolve. Certainly, the most favourable recommendation that was brought forward at the time, to increase the PST by 1 percent, was something that the First Minister (Mr. Doer) immediately dismissed, as did I, as being an option to address the issue.

That being said, we continue to assess how we fund schools and we will continue to do so. I know our commitments have been met with respect to funding at the rate of economic growth, and our commitment has been met with respect to our plan to eliminate the first of two taxes, of course, that being the ESL that is levied provincially. The latest reduction of \$30 million is going to go a long way to reach that commitment.

As the member from Charleswood has said, we have got Liberals, Conservatives, and NDPs all huddled together here. I am sure we have the same situation in Ottawa right now, if I am not mistaken.

* (16:50)

Mrs. Driedger: But you will note which side of the House they are huddled on. They are all around me and not around the Minister of Education (Mr. Bjornson). Actually, the minister is sitting over there all by himself. He looks lonesome.

There has been declining enrolment in Manitoba. If I am correct, it is something like 60 000 over the last number of years. Yet, costs of education seem to be going up fairly significantly, despite we have 60 000 less students. I believe it went from something like 240 000 to 180 000, or something like that. Yet, costs keep rising, property taxes keep rising to pay for costs and, you know, it does not seem to be in sync here.

It just does beg the question, and I know the public asks, "Well, where is all this money going? Our property taxes keep going up, more money is being sunk in education." I know that there was something put out, I believe it might have been by the Frontier Centre, saying that we are one of the if not the biggest spender on education in Canada.

Can the minister explain, I guess, where he sees all of the money going when, in fact, we are

spending the most on education in Canada as we are in health care, and, yet, we see a declining enrolment? Why are costs rising so significantly, and yet we have incredibly less numbers of students?

Mr. Bjornson: Well, there are a number of issues that drive costs. First of all, I have to take exception to a couple of terms that the member from Charleswood used when she talks about sinking money into education and costs. I prefer to look at education as an investment, and that we are investing money in the system. Having said that, the investment is not without challenge with respect to the types of programs that we hope to offer for our students and maintaining appropriate staffing levels to deliver as many options as possible to our students.

I know there was some discussion around the issue during the election. There was some discussion around the issue of eliminating property taxes, but also looking at doing so at the expense of phys ed, music and art, and that is counterintuitive. Phys ed, of course, we all know the need to enhance physical education programs, as we see that we are not without some health challenges. We have committed to task the healthy children, healthy futures task force to talk to the educational partners, as well as the role that they can play in addressing the health issue.

With respect to music and art, there are a lot of data that indicates that learning through the arts is very important to enhance student performance in the classroom, perhaps, or enhance student performance outside the classroom by learning through the arts and learning music and whatnot.

So what we are working towards is a very robust education system that offers students as much as we can possibly offer them and give them opportunities to succeed.

There have been a few cost variables that have driven up budgets. One which I mentioned the other day, as mass consumers of technology and the need for telecommunications, I know the bills have gone up significantly with the telephone system, and that has been an unexpected cost increase. Bills have gone up significantly for transportation purposes when you consider how gas has almost doubled in price in the last six years. The cost of gas for heating

schools has gone up significantly as well, as natural gas is in short supply.

There are a number of physical factors that we have to contend with. The teacher compensation has increased significantly in the last five years, and appropriately so. As a human resource enterprise, education depends very much on the human resource of the teacher, as such, and they need to be compensated appropriately, and certainly there are a few costs that have increased.

The other relationship identified is that, with the declining number of students, the costs are going up. As enrolment declines in smaller areas, smaller schools, it becomes more costly to deliver education to the smaller schools in Manitoba. So, trying to address that is part of the equation, and also technology. The world of technology exists on a planned obsolescence mentality where the next technology is only going to be valid for six months or, in some cases, the technology is obsolete as soon as it is released in the markets. We want to try to provide technical support for our students and, in so doing, the costs are quite significant there. A lot of the decisions that are made locally are reflected in the school budgets as they work towards providing the best opportunities for our children.

So we are going to continue to do our part and invest in our students in an affordable, predictable and sustainable way, and we are going to continue to do so in a way that we can afford to manage appropriate taxation. We did announce the \$30-million reduction in ESL this year, which is, approximately, I would have to check, I think I have the number, a reduction of 2.14 mills, and it brought the provincial ESL down to 2.42 mills in total. Most people will see that on their tax bill this year, that their education taxes have gone down as a result. The average increase in mill rates as levied by the local boards was less than 2 mills.

Having said that, when you do the math of an ESL reduction at 2.14 mills and school divisions increasing on average by just over 1 mill, then there is a pretty significant impact in a reduction, and a real saving for Manitobans on their education taxes.

Mrs. Driedger: Only NDP would come up with math like that, Mr. Chairperson, because what is happening with the decrease in ESL, the special levy is tending to wipe out any of that advantage so that a

lot of people are not going to be seeing much difference on their bills. The only way that we will probably ever get away from that is when the government takes over 100 percent of education funding because, as long as the government is working toward decreasing the ESL, I think we will see that the special levy, by its increasing, is going to prevent people from really having much advantage in terms of more money being saved in their pockets.

But back to the report that the minister has done, and a lot of work did go into that. I know that the government rejected the 1% increase in sales tax, but what has happened since? Are there more meetings? Is there further discussion with any of that stakeholder group?

Mr. Bjornson: I meet on a fairly regular basis with just about every stakeholder group that was represented in that working group. Many of those stakeholders continue to advocate for different options in education funding. As I said, when I first was appointed to office, it was a \$732-million question in terms of how much money was actually levied through property taxes, and, as I sit here today, the question is now \$713 million as our efforts to eliminate the provincial levy, the ESL, have, indeed, made a significant difference.

I have to take exception. I know I taught history, but I do understand math. When you have a mill rate reduction of 2.14 mills and the average increase in the mill rate at the local level is around 1 or 1.1 mills, that, to me, does translate to an actual saving in education taxes. I know that on my own property tax bill I do see that saving.

* (17:00)

With the minister's working group, as I said, there were minority reports attached; there were groups that agreed to disagree. The one favourable recommendation that they had brought forward as a working group was not favourable to us as a government. We would not raise the provincial sales tax. That would have quite a detriment to the retail sector. It would have quite an impact on border communities where the sales tax would not be in harmony with the neighbouring communities. So that recommendation was rejected.

As I said, as I continue to meet with a number of different stakeholders who were part of that process,

there are many that still bring forward different recommendations. Many are suggesting we eliminate it from property taxation as the source of revenue, but are suggesting we do so without offering any concrete or doable options to recoup that revenue. So this is the issue that we are dealing with. We are constantly talking about how we fund education and we will continue to have that dialogue. We are continuing with our commitments to eliminate ESL. We are continuing with our commitment to fund at the rate of economic growth.

Mrs. Driedger: So is the minister, then, going to just leave that report sitting on a shelf gathering dust? Is that where it is just going to stay now?

Mr. Bjornson: Again, we continue to have dialogue. We will probably be referencing the report on occasion as we look at other specific issues that might be raised as possible alternatives. We will continue to use it for referencing. As I said, the actions that we are taking are making a difference, and we will continue that course.

Mrs. Driedger: I just want to go back to a comment that the minister made about education being an investment. I certainly do agree. I do think that, in order to get the quality education system that we need, that our kids deserve, we do have to make an investment in education. I think, though, if the government were to address education funding in the way that it could be and should be funded, we could be leaders in Canada, and, certainly, have an opportunity to work towards some really, really great things if the government were to go down that road. Not only could we have a chance to perhaps properly fund education in the way it would be funded, or could be funded, or should be funded, but we would also see more transparency and accountability, because it would be very obvious where the money was or was not coming from, instead of all these shell games that go on all the time with education funding.

Everybody out there is saying that what we have right now is an archaic system of funding. In fact, in looking back at some of the comments, some people are saying that education funding is in a shambles, that it is archaic, that it is not based on the economic and social realities of today, but, actually, the way we fund education is based on something from the 1950s that no longer exists. Others have said that the way education is funded here, the government's

approach to addressing this is piecemeal, that the system of rebates and tax credits amount to smoke and mirrors, disguising the need to address the real issue of reform. Others have called it a funding mess that thwarts accountability.

In fact, a *Free Press* editorial also said that the Premier's job is to rescue taxpayers and schools from this accountability fraud. So there are actually some fairly strong words out there, just in terms of views that people have about the funding of education in the province, and that what is going on right now is definitely not real reform, that it is more of a "scatter gun approach," and, until changes are made and reform properly addressed, it is going to continue down this road.

My concern right now is that Winnipeg homeowners have received their new property assessments from the City. These new assessments are going to take effect next year in 2006. Many homeowners have seen a significant rise in their property assessment. In fact, according to the Assessment department, on average the value of residential properties has increased 23.2 percent citywide. Now, this is going to cause a big whammy in next year's property taxes. I am sure the minister is very well aware of that, because we can anticipate a 20% to 30% increase in our property taxes in Winnipeg.

To put this in perspective, a homeowner whose house is currently assessed at \$125,000 in Winnipeg might face a tax increase next year of \$400 to \$500 because of this new assessment. I want to ask the minister what does he intend to do about this. Is there a plan to protect taxpayers from this unbelievable tax grab that is going to occur next year?

Mr. Bjornson: Certainly, there are a number of issues around the assessment. I know when I was on municipal council and the community of Gimli had an adjustment to the assessment—*[interjection]*

Sorry, a little distracting in the Chamber here.

As I was saying, when I was on municipal council and the new assessment came in, the council saw fit to adjust the mill rate accordingly so there would not be an actual increase in taxes, and these are decisions that locally elected authorities will be making. I know that many school divisions have done that in the past, adjusted the mill rates to reflect the change in the assessment, and many municipalities have done that. So those will be decisions

that are made at the local level with respect to mill rates and assessments.

Mrs. Driedger: It is going to be such a huge tax grab next year, and that is exactly what it will be. Will the minister ask that those mill rates be adjusted accordingly so that the tax grab, which is going to be millions and millions of dollars, I mean, it is a backdoor way for the government to get more money. Is the minister asking that the mill rates be adjusted downward?

Mr. Bjornson: These are decisions, once again, that are made at the local level, and it is fear-mongering to suggest this is going to be a huge tax grab. It is up to the local politicians. It is up to the local elected school boards to adjust their mill rates accordingly.

Mrs. Driedger: Well, I think the minister better get his head out of the clouds, because that is not fear-mongering. People out there have crunched the numbers in terms of what this is going to cost. This is not fear-mongering. This is the reality of what is out there. In fact, the last time assessment was updated four years ago, Winnipeg decreased its mill rate accordingly so that the total municipal tax dollars collected remained relatively constant overall, but school divisions did not decrease their mill rate to match. The education side of the bill increased, and I am not sure if the minister did not realize that in Winnipeg, that did not happen.

If the government will not take over 100 percent of education funding, does the minister plan to ask school divisions to freeze or lower their mill rates next year and backfill from the Province? Because the school divisions just cannot do that, because they will short-change their own needs, would have to lay off teachers, cut programs, the only way they could properly do that is if the government is prepared to backfill to protect taxpayers from what is going to be the mother of all tax bills. Is the government prepared to do something about this?

* (17:10)

Mr. Bjornson: Once again, these are locally elected officials who make the decisions around the mill rates that are adjusted and set for the purpose of taxation for funding, whether it is municipal or whether it is education.

With respect to the notion of the entire system being outdated, the member has suggested that there

is a misconception about how many jurisdictions still use property taxation as a form of revenues for the purpose of funding education. Currently, in Canada, there are seven jurisdictions that do have provincially levied, or a combination of locally levied and provincially levied education support levies. Currently, when you factor in our \$400 property tax credit in terms of the percentage of funds generated from the taxpayer on property levies to fund education, we compare very favourably with the province of Alberta, and we compare very favourably with the province of Ontario.

We could also make the case that there are actually eight jurisdictions that do use property taxation for the purpose of funding education, because one jurisdiction does have a provincially-levied property tax revenue stream that goes into general revenues. Arguably, we could make the case that at least a portion thereof would be contributed to education funding.

So it is not an archaic system in that regard. It is done differently in different jurisdictions. There are, as I said, seven jurisdictions in Canada that use some form of property taxation for the purpose of funding education.

Mrs. Driedger: Well, you know, the minister is fully aware that education taxes account for over 50 percent of residential property tax bills. In a lot of cases, it is over half, and that is just for school taxes. Manitoba pays the highest property taxes in Canada. You put that on top of income taxes, and being the highest taxed west of the Maritimes, we have the highest property taxes in Canada. If we were to take this 50 percent off, we would be sitting really nicely in terms of attracting more people here, but right now people look at what they see as our property taxes, and that is not inviting for people when they look at the tax regime here. We certainly do not see a lot of economic growth in this province, and you have to start looking at all the reasons why.

I am concerned. I am getting more nervous as I ask the minister because next year we are going to see the mother of all property tax bills in Winnipeg. In 2002, Winnipeg, in line with a policy of not taking advantage of growth in assessment property values, decreased their mill rate by 8 percent to prevent gouging, but the school boards did not. So, in 2002, essentially, government allowed a tax gouge because it did not also decrease its mill rate, and that is tax by stealth.

In the nineties, overall property values were stagnant, or they declined, so there was little consequence to taxpayers, but right now, next year, things are going to change absolutely dramatically. In fact, if the government continues not to do anything next year when reassessments are applied, school boards are going to reap tens of millions of dollars without having to declare a tax increase.

I would like to ask the Minister of Education if he is going to allow this.

Mr. Bjornson: Well, it was interesting to hear the suggestion that the lack of, or the relatively flat property values is inconsequential in terms of taxes, because I have read some of these numbers into the record before, but I will gladly do the same in this context because, in 1990 to 1999, the increases in property taxes were significant.

On average, the provincial average from 1990 to 1999 was 65.6% increase. As property values have gone up in the last five years, we have also seen a decrease in the provincial average in rural school divisions in terms of property taxes. I will gladly refresh the member's memory and read some of the increases that we did see. To suggest that the flat values is inconsequential in terms of tax revenues or tax assessments, that is inconsistent with the patterns that we had seen in the 1990s.

I could start with Interlake again, which had an increase of 230.9 percent from 1990 to 1999, compared to a 6.1% decrease over the first five years that we formed office. Altona, there was an increase of 172 percent. Steinbach had 184.2 percent.

These are incredibly significant numbers in terms of property tax increases. You know, we see places like Park West, minus 29.4 percent; Mountain View, minus 23.5 percent, very significant changes in property taxes.

Yes, property values were flat during the nineties, but taxes increased dramatically. Property values are increasing and taxes are decreasing. I wish they could be as dramatically as they increased in the nineties, but, again, with some of the funding announcements that had come forward, as I said, as a teacher, at this time of year I always looked to my colleagues and wondered who would not be teaching the next year, regardless of the fact that enrolment was projected to stay relatively stable.

It was May, 10 years ago, that 243 teachers were given the pink slip. That is an unprecedented number of teachers laid off in this province, from the announcement of a 0% increase in funding for the education system.

I have to take exception to the suggestion that flat property values did not have an impact on property taxation, because we have the numbers through the frame reports which indicate that indeed was not the case. The fact that property values are going up is the sign of a good economy.

The member also talks about people leaving the province. Well, once again, looking at statistics, our population is increasing and people are coming back to Manitoba.

Mrs. Driedger: What I am referencing is actually from a *Free Press* editorial. I will read it for the minister, this particular paragraph:

"This practice of increasing taxes by stealth has been common every four years when reassessments are conducted since 1990, but, in the past, when overall property values were stagnant or even declining, as they did in 1998, this sleight of hand was of little consequence to taxpayers because the cash consequences were insignificant. By 2002, when values at last began to grow at significant rates, the consequences for unwitting taxpayers had become significant. Now they are becoming more significant again. The latest reassessment indicates that house values have grown on average by more than 20 percent since the last reassessment. When that reassessment is applied next year, it is conceivable that school boards will be able to reap tens of millions of new revenue without having to declare a tax increase."

They go on to say that this kind of taxation by stealth is intolerable. "The most obvious remedy is for the government to cap the amount of revenue that school boards can collect from property at the present level and make up any justifiable shortfalls from general revenues. This would be a good start toward the goal of having the Province eliminate property taxes for the purpose of funding public education."

I will ask the minister again: Is there going to be any movement on his part to cap or freeze the amount school divisions can collect and make up any

justifiable shortfalls from general provincial revenues?

Mr. Bjornson: I now remind the member of our commitment to address the issue of education funding: \$129.8 million more in the system is a significant commitment to education. Significant reductions in the provincial ESL, increase in the property tax credit, increase in the income tax credit for seniors to offset education taxes, the farmland rebate, these are all very significant contributions to affordable and sustainable tax cuts.

* (17:20)

This commitment has been very well received by Manitobans. I know from looking at my own tax bill in my community that my taxes had actually gone down. The net taxes on my property in my home community is, I believe, about \$130 less than it was five years ago. So, yes, there are significant differences being realized by many people as we continue to work with our commitment to fund the creative and economic growth and to cut the provincial levy to ESL. Again, the issue around the adjustment to the mill rights, these are decisions that are made locally. I trust that, as duly elected officials that are duly elected, trustees will act appropriately.

Mrs. Driedger: Well, I think Winnipeg could be in serious, serious problems if we are looking at a \$125,000 home getting hit with a \$500 increase in their bill. It is the experts who are out there who have crunched the numbers, and I really hope that the minister pays some attention to this and moves his government forward on becoming more aggressive at addressing education funding through property taxes. I wish he would at least just even make that commitment that they will at least be moving more aggressively towards doing something.

Can the minister tell us? It related to DSFM. There was an unusually high boost in funding while other divisions got nothing. An awful lot of money, millions, was provided to them. I think there was a deficit, and a lot of money was provided without a new arrangement with the federal government on minority language education. Can the minister explain what happened there?

Mr. Bjornson: The DSFM is not in deficit. I believe that the budget that was recently passed was a deficit budget but, I believe, it was approximately \$50,000.

I can get that number for the member. What had been reported in the paper was in the absence of the agreement that had been ongoing as a negotiation with the federal government, and the new infusion of cash was based on the Comptois report, which was commissioned by the government to look at how the DSFM is funded.

Of course, the member knows that it is a very unique school division in terms of, first of all, the delivery of services that the DSFM provides, the geography that the school division has to address. It is a school division without a clearly defined geography, as the member knows. Schools are located all over Manitoba, which is not without its challenges.

The recommendations that were brought forward by Mr. Comptois were very well received as an affordable solution to the unique needs and requirements of the DSFM. The member also knows that the DSFM does not have the capacity to levy taxes, as the issue of geography very clearly makes that impossible for the DSFM to do. So the DSFM has a unique funding arrangement, and that is appropriately the case because of the realities that DSFM has to address in their delivery of their educational services.

Mrs. Driedger: In October 2004, the Province advanced more than \$8 million to the DSFM, despite the fact that DSFM reported a deficit of only about half of that. Even the chair of DSFM stated, "I do not know how they came up with that number." Can the minister advise, then, when even DSFM is wondering, how did the minister come up with \$8 million to give them?

Mr. Bjornson: The DSFM needed bridge funding to operate the delivery of their services as such. I mean, we are still in the process of negotiating with the federal government on what the funding arrangement would be. So money that was brought forward was bridge funding for the DSFM.

Mrs. Driedger: Why, then, if that is the answer the minister is giving, why would not the chair of DSFM have given that as his answer, rather than indicating he is not sure how the government came up with the number?

Mr. Bjornson: Well, I certainly cannot speak for the chair. What I can speak to is the fact that this has

been something that we have been working on for quite some time once the recommendations were brought forward by Mr. Comptois. Mr. Comptois, of course, is an independent consultant, and the report was submitted in January of 2004. With the recommendations that were brought forward, that was something that the department looked at very closely and determined that 40 recommendations, which included a \$2.4-million increase in funding, would be something that we would explore and act upon appropriately.

Again, part of the situation around the issues that were reported in the paper spoke to the fact that the discussion with the federal government was ongoing, and the situation had not been resolved at the time that DSFM needed the funds to move forward with their programming.

Mrs. Driedger: The RCMP investigation into Morris-Macdonald, they commenced their investigation of this matter late 2001 or early 2002. It is now 2005, more than three year later. I wonder if the minister could provide the House with an update as to the status of the RCMP investigation of this matter which led the government to dismiss a school division board of trustees at the time.

Mr. Bjornson: I will have to take that as notice.

Mrs. Driedger: Well, I will answer it for the minister that the RCMP completed its investigation in December of 2004 and has forwarded their finding to the Crown attorney's department. We are now months after that, and it seems that the minister should be far more aware of where this particular situation is at, seeing as it was an incredibly serious situation.

On the same matter, it is my understanding that, at the time, the taxpayers of the Morris-Macdonald School Division formed an organization called the Morris-Macdonald Citizens Coalition. This organization launched legal proceedings against the government in dispute of the amount of repayment of funds which the government required the school division to repay for alleged inflated enrolment in adult learning centres. I wonder if the minister can confirm if, indeed, this group of citizens has launched legal action against the government regarding this matter.

Mr. Bjornson: The member essentially answered her own question with respect to the status because

she did reference the fact that it was referred to the Justice Department, and that particular portfolio is a couple of benches in front of me.

Mrs. Driedger: Can the minister indicate if this group of citizens, he has not answered the question, because it is a group of concerned citizens, and I would think as the minister he would know if they have launched legal action against the government.

Mr. Bjornson: I will have to take that as notice.

Mrs. Driedger: Fine.

I note that some advice was just given to the current Minister of Education from the past Minister of Education who thinks it is probably not appropriate to speak about that currently in the House because of the legal issues around it.

So I would appreciate, because that is probably going to come up in the next few weeks then, I would hope that the minister would be forthcoming with some information.

Regarding assessment, can the minister advise when the new assessment plan is going to be in

place, so that no students are going to miss the opportunity to have their progress measured?

Mr. Bjornson: We have had extensive consultations, and we will be piloting the assessment next fall.

Mrs. Driedger: Where will it be piloted, and how many, is it schools or school divisions or students? How will you do it?

Mr. Bjornson: We are continuing to consult with the schools and find which schools would be willing to participate in that process.

Mr. Chairperson: The hour being 5:30 p.m., committee rise.

Call in the Speaker.

IN SESSION

Mr. Speaker: The hour being 5:30, this House is adjourned and stands adjourned until 1:30 p.m. on Tuesday, and have a good long weekend.

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF MANITOBA

Thursday, May 19, 2005

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