

Fifth Session - Fortieth Legislature
of the
Legislative Assembly of Manitoba
DEBATES
and
PROCEEDINGS

Official Report
(Hansard)

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authority of
The Honourable Daryl Reid
Speaker*

MANITOBA LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
Fortieth Legislature

Member	Constituency	Political Affiliation
ALLAN, Nancy	St. Vital	NDP
ALLUM, James, Hon.	Fort Garry-Riverview	NDP
ALTEMEYER, Rob	Wolseley	NDP
ASHTON, Steve, Hon.	Thompson	NDP
BLADY, Sharon, Hon.	Kirkfield Park	NDP
BRAUN, Erna, Hon.	Rossmere	NDP
BRIESE, Stuart	Agassiz	PC
CALDWELL, Drew, Hon.	Brandon East	NDP
CHIEF, Kevin, Hon.	Point Douglas	NDP
CHOMIAK, Dave, Hon.	Kildonan	NDP
CROTHERS, Deanne, Hon.	St. James	NDP
CULLEN, Cliff	Spruce Woods	PC
DEWAR, Greg, Hon.	Selkirk	NDP
DRIEDGER, Myrna	Charleswood	PC
EICHLER, Ralph	Lakeside	PC
EWASKO, Wayne	Lac du Bonnet	PC
FRIESEN, Cameron	Morden-Winkler	PC
GAUDREAU, Dave	St. Norbert	NDP
GERRARD, Jon, Hon.	River Heights	Liberal
GOERTZEN, Kelvin	Steinbach	PC
GRAYDON, Cliff	Emerson	PC
HELWER, Reg	Brandon West	PC
HOWARD, Jennifer	Fort Rouge	NDP
IRVIN-ROSS, Kerri, Hon.	Fort Richmond	NDP
JHA, Bidhu	Radisson	NDP
KOSTYSHYN, Ron, Hon.	Swan River	NDP
LATHLIN, Amanda	The Pas	NDP
LEMIEUX, Ron, Hon.	Dawson Trail	NDP
MACKINTOSH, Gord, Hon.	St. Johns	NDP
MALOWAY, Jim	Elmwood	NDP
MARCELINO, Flor, Hon.	Logan	NDP
MARCELINO, Ted	Tyndall Park	NDP
MARTIN, Shannon	Morris	PC
MELNICK, Christine	Riel	NDP
MITCHELSON, Bonnie	River East	PC
NEVAKSHONOFF, Thomas, Hon.	Interlake	NDP
OSWALD, Theresa	Seine River	NDP
PALLISTER, Brian	Fort Whyte	PC
PEDERSEN, Blaine	Midland	PC
PETTERSEN, Clarence	Flin Flon	NDP
PIWNIUK, Doyle	Arthur-Virden	PC
REID, Daryl, Hon.	Transcona	NDP
ROBINSON, Eric, Hon.	Kewatinook	NDP
RONDEAU, Jim	Assiniboia	NDP
ROWAT, Leanne	Riding Mountain	PC
SARAN, Mohinder, Hon.	The Maples	NDP
SCHULER, Ron	St. Paul	PC
SELINGER, Greg, Hon.	St. Boniface	NDP
SMOOK, Dennis	La Verendrye	PC
STEFANSON, Heather	Tuxedo	PC
STRUTHERS, Stan	Dauphin	NDP
SWAN, Andrew	Minto	NDP
WIEBE, Matt	Concordia	NDP
WIGHT, Melanie, Hon.	Burrows	NDP
WISHART, Ian	Portage la Prairie	PC
<i>Vacant</i>	Gimli	—
<i>Vacant</i>	Southdale	—

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF MANITOBA

Thursday, February 25, 2016

The House met at 1:30 p.m.

Mr. Speaker: Good afternoon, everyone. Please be seated.

ROUTINE PROCEEDINGS

INTRODUCTION OF BILLS

Bill 18—The Path to Reconciliation Act

Hon. Eric Robinson (Minister of Aboriginal and Northern Affairs): Yes, Mr. Speaker. I move, seconded by the Minister of Education, that Bill 18, The Path to Reconciliation Act, be now read a first time.

Motion presented.

Mr. Robinson: Mr. Speaker, I'm pleased to introduce the—to the Legislative Assembly for the first reading number—Bill 18, The Path to Reconciliation Act.

This bill sets out a strong commitment by this provincial government to continue to move forward in its effort to reconcile the relationship between indigenous and nonindigenous peoples in our province. It also highlights, Mr. Speaker, the government's values and commitments to reconciliatory action and builds upon the considerable momentum that exists as a result of the recent calls to action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada.

Mr. Speaker: Is it the pleasure of the House to adopt the motion? *[Agreed]*

Any further introduction of bills?

**Bill 202—The Employment Standards Code
Amendment Act (Sick Notes)**

Mr. Dave Gaudreau (St. Norbert): Mr. Speaker, I move, seconded by the member for Radisson (Mr. Jha), that Bill 202, The Employment Standards Code Amendment Act (Sick Notes), be now read for a first time.

Motion presented.

Mr. Gaudreau: This bill deals with something that's all near and dear to our side of the House, is health care, and working on the system to streamline it and to allow doctors to actually see sick patients and deal with true illnesses rather than employers using it as a

management system, really, to try to have employees bring sick notes in.

We're going to—this bill deals with also laying out that other practitioners such as nurse practitioners, pharmacists and nurses would be allowed to write doctor's notes, freeing up doctor's time, valuable time in our system. We all know that our medical system doctors are very valued, and we want to make sure that they're able to be used in our system efficiently.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker: Is it the pleasure of the House to adopt the motion? *[Agreed]*

Bill 203—The Results-Based Budgeting Act

Mrs. Heather Stefanson (Tuxedo): I move, seconded by the member for Morden-Winkler (Mr. Friesen), that Bill 203, The Results-Based Budgeting Act; Loi sur la budgétisation axée sur les résultats, be now read a first time.

Motion presented.

Mrs. Stefanson: This bill requires the budgets for all government programs, services, agencies, boards and commissions to be reviewed on a regular cycle to ensure that they are delivering the outcomes that the public needs, and, once the review process is completed for a given program, the budget for the program will be re-established. The process is to be transparent, with the findings and recommendations of program reviews made public.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker: Is it the pleasure of the House to adopt the motion? *[Agreed]*

Bill 204—The Cyberbullying Prevention Act

Mr. Wayne Ewasko (Lac du Bonnet): I move, seconded by the member from Brandon West, that Bill 204, The Cyberbullying Prevention Act; Loi sur la prévention de la cyberintimidation, be now read a first time.

Motion presented.

Mr. Ewasko: I am pleased to introduce once again to the House Bill 204, The Cyberbullying Prevention Act.

Mr. Speaker, this bill enables a protection order to be made when a judicial Justice of the Peace has determined that a person has engaged in cyberbullying. A protection order may contain a number of provisions to protect the person who is subjected to cyberbullying. The bill also creates the new tort of cyberbullying; the victim may sue the person engaging in cyberbullying.

Mr. Speaker, we know that cyberbullying is a significant problem not only in this province but in our country. The NDP have failed to provide that response so we have done so on behalf of all Manitobans, all Manitobans and youth, and so we look forward to the entire House getting on board with this bill and moving it forward to committee.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker: Is it the pleasure of the House to adopt the motion? [*Agreed*]

Bill 205—The Seniors' Rights and Elder Abuse Protection Act

Mr. Cliff Graydon (Emerson): I move, seconded by the member for Spruce Woods (Mr. Cullen), that Bill 205, The Seniors' Rights and Elder Abuse Protection Act, be now read for the first time.

Motion presented.

Mr. Graydon: Mr. Speaker, this bill establishes a bill of rights for the Manitoba seniors. It also establishes an elder abuse protection team and imposes a duty to report this elder abuse, prohibits reprisals for reporting elder abuse and permits information sharing about elder abuse with the Adult Abuse Registry Committee, the minister responsible for the protection of the persons in care act and the executive director appointed under The Vulnerable Persons Living with a Mental Disability Act.

It also makes it an offence to make a false report and it requires the minister to table annual reports in the Assembly. Accountability is so terribly important.

Mr. Speaker: Is it the pleasure of the House to adopt the motion? [*Agreed*]

Any further introduction of bills?

Bill 206—The Workers Compensation Amendment Act (Employer Advisers)

Mr. Dennis Smook (La Verendrye): I move, seconded by the member for Brandon West (Mr. Helwer), that Bill 206, The Workers

Compensation Amendment Act, be now read a first time.

Motion presented.

Mr. Smook: This bill creates an employer adviser that'll help employers navigate the work—the system. It'll put them on a same playing ground as what there is for an employee adviser.

Mr. Speaker: Is it the pleasure of the House to adopt the motion? [*Agreed*]

Any further introduction of bills?

Seeing none, we'll move on to committee reports, tabling reports, ministerial statements.

MEMBERS' STATEMENTS

La Loche Community

Ms. Amanda Lathlin (The Pas): The tragedy visited upon La Loche, Saskatchewan, has left the community in mourning and the country shaken.

Though it happened a province away, it is personal for me.

* (13:40)

The struggles that the people of La Loche are talking about—poverty, lack of education, lack of mental health supports—these are struggles shared by my family, my friends, my neighbours and myself, and by people across the north.

We also share the desire to find solutions. The people of La Loche are calling for better resources to deal with substance abuse and mental health. They're calling for a renewed relationship with our indigenous peoples, and they're calling for better opportunities to get a good education and a good job.

This is what people in La Loche want, and this is what people in The Pas want as well and across northern Manitoba. When we invest in these priorities, we help realize our communities' hopes and dreams and we help each other heal.

Yesterday, La Loche took a big step on the path to healing with hundreds of people joining in a walk through the town called Reclaiming Our School. My heart is with the students and the staff of Ducharme Elementary School, as they returned to school yesterday and for the first time—since the first time since the shooting, and with students and staff of Dene High School as they return tomorrow.

Ducharme Vice-Principal Erin Trotechaud said that the children's smiles lifted a heavy presence

from the building. She said, it's amazing how when you fill it with children and there's laughter and there's smiles, it just kind of washes it away, and it was really beautiful. It feels like home again.

Thank you.

Children's Special Allowance

Mr. Ian Wishart (Portage la Prairie): I rise today to express my concern over how this NDP government is handling the Children's Special Allowance, paid by the federal government in lieu of the Universal Child Care Benefit to the agencies responsible for the care of the children under their care in CFS. Since before 2000, these funds has been paid by the federal government to the agencies, specifically for the care—for their children in care, and this money was often paid, through these agencies, for the benefit of the foster families, often to provide them with extras at birthdays and Christmas and for fees for sports and other special activities. Many agencies, in fact, would put half of this money aside for the children when they reached 18.

In 2008, this government increased their funding by \$4.9 million to the First Nations agencies, but they began to claw back the Children's Special Allowance. Today, that Children's Special Allowance is worth two point—or \$29 million, hardly a fair trade. They even went so far to insist that agencies refund the money that had been kept in trusts by that agencies for individual children. Hardly fair to those individual children.

This policy of clawing back CSAs from First Nation agencies has left them severely underfunded and at risk of financial failure. Where is—what is this government thinking when following this type of policy? Clearly, they are not thinking about the children under the care of these agencies.

Madeline Schultz

Hon. Erna Braun (Minister of Labour and Immigration): Mr. Speaker, I love hearing Rossmere success stories, especially when it's about a young person who got their start in our community. Madeline Schultz first started playing soccer in 2003 for the North Kildonan Community Centre Cobras. And now, 13 years later, she's been accepted as a member of the U of M Bisons' prestigious soccer team. She credits her five-year stint with the Cobras for teaching her the fundamentals that have given—that have made her such a talented player.

The team's dedicated volunteer coaches honed Madeline's skills, and her competitive drive landed her a spot on her high school team, the Miles Mac Buckeyes. Once she graduated and enrolled at the University of Manitoba, Madeline went immediately to the Bison tryouts. An ACL injury in high school had put her on the sidelines, but despite missing a few years where most players prepare for varsity level sports, Madeline would not be deterred.

Bison coaches spotted her fancy footwork, determination and positive attitude and offered her a spot as a mid-fielder. Stories like Madeline's remind me of the importance of investments in our community centres. Programs like community places help local community centres make team sports available to our youth, encouraging physical activities, skill building and a healthy lifestyle.

For an athlete, community sports provide an invaluable connection with coaches and other teammates. Players like Madeline can get their start on a community team where they develop not only individual skills but team work, and doors can be open to elite sports opportunities.

I commend Madeline on her dedication and hard work, and it's really paying off.

On behalf of all members, congratulations and good luck in the coming season.

Bipole III Line—Landowner Concerns

Mr. Blaine Pedersen (Midland): The actions of this NDP government with the hurry-up order to Manitoba Hydro regarding construction of the Bipole III transmission line is shameful. First, it was a secret expropriation of 100-plus landowners across Manitoba by the NDP Cabinet in order to bypass the normal legal procedures—first time in Manitoba Hydro history. Then there's the constant harassment and bullying of landowners, trying to get them to sign an inferior easement agreement leaving all the risk and liability with the landowners.

The Manitoba bipole landowners committee continues to ask Manitoba Hydro to sit down with them to address these concerns. It's called collective bargaining. But the NDP masters of Manitoba Hydro will—are—will not allow the corporation to bargain collectively. What is the NDP afraid of?

Now the NDP has stooped to new lows of disrespect for Manitobans after hiring a private security firm to bully landowners—no doubt, another untendered contract. When this move failed to bend

the resolve of the landowners, the NDP then turned to the RCMP: four cruisers on the scene, just to back the NDP—four cruisers. You can't get that out for any kind of real emergency. Now, after the private security and RCMP failed to intimidate Manitoba property landowners, the NDP has now turned to a private investigator to spy on landowners, take photographs of landowners and their vehicles. This is police-state mentality. How shameful of this NDP government.

All this could have been avoided if only the NDP government would allow Manitoba Hydro to enter into collective bargaining with the landowners to address their legitimate concerns.

But never doubt the resolve of these Manitobans. Whether it's private security, RCMP, private investigators, they will not be bullied or intimidated by this tired, desperate Selinger government. These hardy Manitobans are looking forward to helping make a change for the better come April 19th.

West End Safe Space

Mr. Andrew Swan (Minto): Mr. Speaker, there's nothing more important than the safety and well-being of our children. While in general our children have never been safer and more children than ever are now graduating from high school, we know there is more work to be done to help our most vulnerable youth.

Kim Bouvette is a West End mother who recognized the need for extended hours for programming in a safe space for youth who are vulnerable to the risks of drugs, gangs and sexual exploitation. Kim took action and raised her voice. She went door to door petitioning for the project. She mobilized the board members, staff and volunteers at the Spence Neighbourhood Association, and the SNA held numerous public forums and information meetings with West End residents to gauge the support within the community for Kim's vision.

The SNA then embarked upon an ambitious fundraising campaign. They staged a benefit concert at the West End Cultural Centre and organized a pancake breakfast. SNA volunteers handed out free coffee and muffins to drivers at the corner of Ellice and Maryland, handing out pamphlets about their fundraiser. Their efforts paid off. In total the SNA raised \$35,000 so far, exceeding their goal.

Kim and the SNA found a willing partner in our NDP government. Building on our successful investments in Rossbrook House and with Ndinawe,

we've committed \$380,000 over the next three years to help the West End safe space become a reality. The money will support staff so the space can remain open all night when children are most at risk. The community and SNA will determine the best way to attract, assist and support youth in need of a safe place to go.

I urge all Manitobans to volunteer their time or donate to the Spence Neighbourhood Association through their GoFundMe site to help this amazing project.

Congratulations and well done to Kim Bouvette, SNA Executive Director Jamil Mahmood and all of the staff, board and volunteers. Your work exemplifies the caring spirit of Manitoba and the support of an NDP government that believes everyone matters, can do great things.

Thank you.

Introduction of Guests

Mr. Speaker: Just prior to oral questions. I'd like to draw the attention of honourable members to the loge to my left where we have Mr. Gerry McAlpine, who is the former member for Sturgeon Creek.

On behalf of honourable members, we welcome you back to the Legislature.

And also seated in the public gallery we have with us today from the Manitoba Institute of Trades and Technology, we have 20 adult English as an additional language students under the direction of Marie Rogge, and this group is located in the constituency of the honourable Minister of Education and Advanced Learning (Mr. Allum).

On behalf of honourable members, we welcome you here this afternoon.

ORAL QUESTIONS

OCN First Nation Manitoba Hydro Contract

Mr. Brian Pallister (Leader of the Official Opposition): On February 19th of 2015, I understand that the Premier (Mr. Selinger) and the Deputy Premier journeyed to The Pas.

And my question for the Premier is: Did they at that time meet with the OCN council and what was the purpose of the meeting?

Hon. Dave Chomiak (Minister of Mineral Resources): Mr. Speaker, I understand that a meeting took place.

Mr. Pallister: I appreciate the non-response.

* (13:50)

Mr. Speaker, on February 19th, 2015, the Premier (Mr. Selinger) and Deputy Premier met with the OCN band, and I want to know if Chief Michael Constant was in attendance at that meeting with the Premier, please.

Mr. Chomiak: Yes.

Mr. Pallister: Thank you for the straightforward answer.

Media have obtained a letter from OCN Chief Michael Constant that was addressed to the Deputy Premier of Manitoba. The letter is dated April 21st of 2015, approximately two months after the meeting occurred. In it the chief says he clearly understood that support would be given to his band if they supported Premier Selinger in the election process.

Would the Premier please outline for the House today: What was the support that was offered to Chief Constant and OCN at the meeting?

Mr. Chomiak: Mr. Speaker, I understand at that time that there was discussion concerning a hydro contract, and I understand at that time, like all contracts that are tendered, a tender was offered or proposed with respect to that contract and that was followed.

Mr. Speaker: The honourable Leader of the Official Opposition, on a new question.

Mr. Pallister: Well, if that was the case, Chief Constant wouldn't have been concerned enough to write a letter to the Deputy Premier, would he? And we've learned from a transcript dated December 17th, 2015, from an interview with Chief Constant done by CBC News, that the offer consisted of work on the bipole line—jobs for OCN in exchange for votes for the Premier.

Now, Chief Constant was obviously concerned that no such jobs had ensued as a result of the meeting and wrote his letter as a result of that concern.

Would the Premier confirm today that he made that offer of jobs for votes, and if he did not, then who did?

Hon. Eric Robinson (Minister responsible for Manitoba Hydro): Mr. Speaker, no such offer was made.

Mr. Pallister: Well, the Deputy Premier's denial rings hollow, Mr. Speaker. The offer of jobs at Hydro, according to Chief Michael Constant, a chief of some renown in this province, was made and the Deputy Premier is the premier in charge of Hydro. The Deputy Premier is the minister in charge of Hydro.

So if the Premier did not make the offer himself, I would like the Premier to tell us: Was he present for the entirety of the meeting with OCN or not?

Mr. Robinson: The meeting that the Leader of the Opposition is referring to, Mr. Speaker, in fact, did not include the Premier. I was alone in that meeting with staff, and it included Chief Michael Constant and members of his council and some elders from the community.

Mr. Pallister: So, Mr. Speaker, on the very day that the government makes a show of The Path to Reconciliation Act, we have the Deputy Premier of Manitoba standing in his place and calling the chief of OCN a liar, saying that the chief of OCN is a liar on the day that this is tabled in this House, and that is shameful and that is disrespectful, and that is disrespectful to all Manitoba's indigenous people and that is disrespectful to all Manitobans on the very day the chief is called a liar, and the Premier wasn't in the meeting, apparently, allegedly, so there's plausible deniability.

So I'd like to know from the Premier, from the Premier of Manitoba I would like to know: Did he leave the room, miss the meeting so that the offer could be made?

Mr. Robinson: While the questions are being asked, Mr. Speaker, it appears that the story is being made up as we go along.

Let me just clarify for the record, and if I could have the respect, perhaps they don't respect indigenous peoples, but at the very least respect a person that is trying to respond to a very serious allegation being made by the members opposite.

We were not made of any—we were not made aware of any investigation until today before the noon hour. It's a false accusation. I'm sure that'll be rectified and clarified later on today by Chief Michael Constant. There's false information contained in the remarks made by the Leader of the Opposition. In fact, the deadline for the delegate selection was on February 16th. The meeting occurred on February 19th that the Leader of the Opposition is referring to.

Mr. Speaker—

Mr. Speaker: Order, please. The honourable minister's time on this question has elapsed.

The honourable Leader of the Official Opposition, on a new question.

Mr. Pallister: So here's what we know: that we know now that a meeting occurred in February. We know that the chief, Michael Constant, sent a letter to the Deputy Premier outlining his concerns approximately two months later. And we know that in December of last year, eight months later, the chief told the same story that he had been telling all through the year. He didn't change his story. He said in an interview: When you shake someone's hand, when you make a mutual agreement, when you have an understanding with government, you would think they would follow through. That's what the chief of OCN said in December, eight months after this meeting. The chief of OCN stuck to his story.

So I'd like to know if the government's going to stick to their story that the chief is a liar.

Mr. Robinson: Michael Constant is a good friend of mine, Mr. Speaker. I believe that he is one of our valued leaders in the province of Manitoba in the indigenous community.

Allow me to read into the record for you, Mr. Speaker, and also members in this Chamber, that I just received a letter that was sent to Mr. Bill Bowles, the Commissioner of Elections for the Province of Manitoba, signed by Chief Michael Constant. In this letter it says: I'm—provide clarity on the recent allegations being made against Minister Robinson and Premier Selinger. For the record, Minister Robinson did not promise work on Bipole III in exchange for my community's support in Premier Selinger's leadership bid for the NDP party leader or the—NDP support in the upcoming election. My signature does not appear on this letter. It was drafted by overzealous staff. It—I was not given the opportunity to pursue the letter before it went out. I apologize for the fervour and political positioning that this letter has created.

Mr. Speaker, I don't—

Mr. Speaker: Order, please. The minister has offered to table the letter, so if one of our staff would please take the letter. Thank you.

Okay, we'll now proceed to the next question.

Mr. Pallister: So let's—oh, sorry, Mr. Speaker—

Mr. Speaker: Just one moment, please.

While I'm on my feet, before I recognize the honourable Leader of the Official Opposition—my apologies for interrupting—I want to remind honourable members of the House, please, when you're even quoting from documents or you're making—asking questions in the House, that we refer to members of this House by their constituency names or ministers by their portfolio, please. Okay?

The honourable Leader of the Official Opposition, please.

Mr. Pallister: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

Let's recap, then. We know there was a meeting. It involved the Premier (Mr. Selinger) and Deputy Premier and it involved Chief Michael Constant. Chief Michael Constant alleged for over a year that jobs were promised in exchange for votes. And he alleged that the promises were made by the government, wrote to the government and asked why the promises were not kept, and he stuck to his story for an entire year.

Now, we know that when allegations come to light, the Premier always shifts to damage control mode, as his colleagues do as well. So let me ask this question of the premier in charge of Manitoba—of the leader, deputy leader, in charge of Manitoba Hydro.

Has OCN received, since December, any jobs or contracts or subcontracts from Manitoba Hydro for doing Bipole III work, and would those be belated fulfillment of the government's promise of a year ago?

Mr. Robinson: Mr. Speaker, let me quote from the letter again. The last sentence says: "It was drafted by overzealous staff members; I was not given the opportunity to peruse this letter before it went out. I apologize for the fervor and political positioning that this letter has created."

Mr. Speaker, I don't wish myself or anybody in this Chamber, and I don't think this is—I don't wish bad on any indigenous person in the province of Manitoba. In fact, for all my life I have been a champion for the rights of indigenous people, and you know what? Playing cheap political games at the expense of suffering Indians is hardly honourable.

* (14:00)

Mr. Pallister: And, Mr. Speaker, truer words—truer words—have never been spoken in this House. Cheap political games is exactly what we're talking about

here in respect of the government's conduct. An overzealous staffer did not do an interview with CBC News in December, eight months after this meeting. And six months after, a letter was penned, asking: Where were the jobs? An overjealous-overzealous staffer did not go to the media a full eight months after. That was not an overzealous staffer, that was Chief Michael Constant, who said, we were promised jobs for votes, in December of last year. Not an overzealous staffer, sir, not even close.

And now, desperate times calling for desperate measures, in the middle of an historic leadership race caused by a rebellion against him, and days prior to the mail-in-cut off for mail-in ballots, I have to ask the Premier (Mr. Selinger): When he went to The Pas and got in that taxpayer-funded plane, did he go as a premier or as a leadership candidate? Which was it?

Mr. Chomiak: Mr. Speaker, I'm terribly saddened on the day that we are introducing the most progressive and most innovative legislation in the history of this country, to bring reconciliation to First Nations and indigenous peoples, that the members would have the temerity to raise issues like this, even though it's been contradicted in writing by the individual that they allege said that.

I think it's below contempt, and I ask on the Leader of the Opposition, based on the information today, that he apologize not only to the people of this Chamber, but to all indigenous peoples for doing that on today's date, when the most important bill we've ever had come before this Chamber.

Elections Manitoba Investigation NDP Leadership Campaign

Mr. Kelvin Goertzen (Steinbach): Under the Manitoba Elections Act, bribery is one of the most serious allegations that can happen. In fact, a penalty of bribery under the Manitoba Elections Act is punishable by nearly two years of jail and also a significant fine.

Mr. Speaker, these allegations have been there now for more than a year. A letter that came a year ago from the chief and from the band, it was copied to six different people; it was confirmed in the media months after, Mr. Speaker, and I wonder when the Premier received this letter.

A year ago, when the Premier received this letter a year ago with the allegations of bribery, did he immediately, as any premier would do, take it to the chief-Commissioner of Elections to have it

investigated? Did he take it to have investigated or did he do nothing?

Hon. Dave Chomiak (Minister of Mineral Resources): It is interesting, on the day that the treaty reconciliation bill appears on the Order Paper, the member for Steinbach launches a complaint with Elections Manitoba about allegations he has no first-person knowledge of and which, today, the Leader of the Opposition has the gall to stand up and accept as truth, not ask a question, know there's an investigation, stand up and make it an issue in order, Mr. Speaker, to take away what we know to be his true agenda.

Today, he wanted to open up expenses in elections. He wanted to get rid of—he wanted to have—bring back corporate donations. He wants to give it to his friends, Mr. Speaker. There is no clearer example of where the Tories stand about who they represent and where we stand. They're for their big corporate friends; we're trying to do the best we can for all Manitobans, particularly those who have less.

Mr. Goertzen: Mr. Speaker, it was a year ago—almost a year ago that the letter went alleging that there was a bribe offer, votes for support for the Premier. It was copied to counsel of the band; it was copied to the Premier; it was copied to the president of Manitoba Hydro; it was copied to Grand Chief Derek Nepinak; it was copied to others. And yes—and yet, even after it was confirmed in the media months later by the chief, even after it was brought to the light, nothing came forward. And the Premier now, he's not saying much today, but we're to understand that when he was told—when he was told—about these allegations of bribery, he didn't want to bring it to the Commissioner of Elections; he didn't want to have it investigated; he didn't think allegations of bribery is serious.

Is that because perhaps he was concerned he may actually have been guilty? Is that why he didn't bring it to the commissioner?

Mr. Chomiak: This is like being accused of beating your dog.

Mr. Speaker, you know, the member launched an investigation and allegation today, or very recently, about the things that happened a while ago, things that weren't true, things that have been categorically denied today by the chief who was supposed to have said this.

And yet, the member and the Leader of the Opposition had the gall—the leader who was sitting in

Cabinet when the worst scandal in Manitoba history occurred, when they vote rigged, when chief Monnin said that he'd never seen more liars in his life than the Conservative Party, when chief Monnin said that people should go to jail for what they did, but because they had suffered enough when they tried to form a political party to take votes away from the NDP. When that leader sat in that Cabinet and did that, they have the gall to stand up on the day when we're trying to reconcile and make spurious allegations that have not been investigated and have been proven by the member to be not correct.

Mr. Speaker, it shows to what depths they will go.

Mr. Speaker: Order, please. The honourable minister's time has elapsed on this question.

Mr. Goertzen: Well, Mr. Speaker, of course, we know there are many dirty tricks that happened on the NDP leadership campaign. Some of them that the member for Thompson (Mr. Ashton) was involved in were documented in the Winnipeg Free Press, not the least of which was a pretty sweet deal on his leadership campaign office. We know that there were other things that happened. There was vote tampering in Swan River. In fact, they decided to redo the votes in Swan River because of the vote tampering.

So this, perhaps, didn't come as a surprise to the Premier (Mr. Selinger). There was vote tampering in Swan River. There was—different things that were happening with the member for Thompson. In fact, the only one of the three leadership candidates who hasn't been alleged to have done something dirty is the one who's leaving the party, and maybe that tells you something.

Mr. Speaker, can the Premier tell us: Is the reason that he didn't bring this to the commissioner himself a year ago when these allegations of bribery came forward is because this is just business as usual for him and it didn't seem unusual to him.

Hon. Eric Robison (Deputy Premier): Mr. Speaker, it would appear that the members do have a record of the back and forth letters that were sent between Chief Constant and I. They will recall that I immediately addressed the issue upon receipt of the initial letter. The chief did not sign and indicated he refuted that as well. I tabled that record. I tabled that for the public record for members to be aware.

But, you know what? I've already said—*[interjection]* If the member would listen I'll explain

it to him. On the 16th of February, 2015, the deadline for the delegate selection was done. I met on the 19th of February, 2015, with Chief Constant, members of his council and elders of the community. Again, let me repeat, Mr. Speaker, hardly—

Mr. Speaker: Order, please, the honourable minister's time on this question has elapsed.

The honourable member for Steinbach, on a new question.

Mr. Goertzen: Well, of course, you know, it's difficult to believe the NDP when you consider their record.

Let's talk about the Premier, who—where the first time he ran for election him and dozens of NDP candidates falsified their elections returns and had to return \$75,000. In 2004, the NDP violated the elections finances act by taking bundled donations from unions. In 2009 the former Finance minister was found to have violated the elections finances act by handing out cheques during an election. In 2013 the Court of Queen's Bench found the NDP were trying to breach a contract and put Assiniboine downs out of business, and now they're under investigation for bribery.

Perhaps the reason that the Premier didn't refer this himself—as any good premier would do—to the elections commissioner, is that this is just one of many, many breaches that he's been involved in.

Mr. Robison: Well, the House leader on the other side, Mr. Speaker, is getting into areas that are not part of the main discussion at hand. So I would advise him to revert back to the original question that was raised.

Again, I have to ask members why, on this day when we're introducing a piece of legislation that nobody else has done on earth, would they raise this issue at this time—and also on a day where members opposite have been virtually quiet and uncaring about missing and murdered Aboriginal women and girls across Canada—would they raise this issue?

Again, Mr. Speaker, I don't have the time, nor should the members, to play cheap political games at the expense of suffering Indians.

* (14:10)

Mr. Goertzen: Mr. Speaker, if we waited for a day when there wasn't an ethical breach by this government, we'd never be able to ask these questions.

Mr. Speaker, in 2013 the provincial Ombudsman found that the NDP minister of Immigration had politically manipulated the civil service. In 2014 the Ombudsman found that the NDP had not released, as required by law, all of the emails for that previous investigation. Late last year, the Auditor General released a scathing report on millions of dollars of untendered contracts to friends of the Minister of Infrastructure. Currently, the Premier's (Mr. Selinger) former chief of staff is under investigation for missing money which might include taxpayers' dollars, and now the Commissioner of Elections is investigating this government for potential bribery. The list goes on and on and on.

There isn't a day—there isn't a day—that we could find where there isn't an ethical breach to bring forward on this government.

Why don't they just acknowledge that time after time, they simply don't want to follow the law?

Mr. Chomiak: Mr. Speaker, let me try to clarify for the member for Steinbach and the self-righteous members opposite. I would table a copy of the letter dated May 4th, 2015 that was written from the minister of northern Aboriginal affairs to Mr.—to Chief Constant, that they conveniently forget to put in their summary of events that happened.

Let me get to the point. Members opposite stood up, the Leader of the Opposition stood up and made allegations of, quote, lying, Mr. Speaker, in this House. He's been shown, by a letter on file that, in fact, he was wrong. What's at stake here is the reputation of that member who stood up on a day—and for once, in his whole career, I beg of him almost: Will he apologize for once in his entire career? Because the entire time I've been here, that member has never apologized for the many errors he has made and the many, many mistakes he's made.

And, Mr. Speaker—

Mr. Speaker: Order, please. The honourable minister's time on this question has elapsed.

The honourable member for Steinbach, on a final supplementary.

Mr. Goertzen: Over and over, Mr. Speaker, when the minister of Immigration was found to have manipulated the civil service, they denied it. When the Minister of Infrastructure was found to have had untendered contracts with his friends, he denied it. Over and over, it's one denial after the next, and over and over we find out that the government actually,

when it had been investigation, that there have been misappropriations and there have been things that have been done improper and in some times, they've been done illegally.

Now, we know—we know—that Manitobans are tired. They're tired of the scandal that hangs over this NDP government's head. I actually think some of their own caucus members are tired of the scandal that hangs over their heads as well.

Will the government finally acknowledge the only way this cloud of persistent, the only way this cloud of consistent scandal that is over the NDP is ever going to be cleared up is if Manitobans clear it up on April 19th, because it's a government that doesn't know how to behave ethically anymore.

Mr. Chomiak: Mr. Speaker, who are tired—who are tired—are the thousands and millions of men and women, particularly those of poor, indigenous backgrounds, who for over 100 years have waited for reconciliation. Who are tired of the men and women who are, today, with the Premier at a conference talking about missing and murdered women. Who are tired of people of empty promises about fulfilling the commitments made when we were fortunate enough to come to this country and have all of the benefits and all of the richness that we have. What they are tired of is the inequality of people like the Leader of the Opposition, who wants to open up our electoral system to be American-like, where money counts for everything and people and issues and values count for nothing.

That's what's tiring, Mr. Speaker. And we will fight today, we will fight tomorrow, regardless of what happens April 19th, for those people, because we represent them in the Legislature and they deserve our support and help.

CFS First Nations Agencies Use of Children's Special Allowance

Mr. Ian Wishart (Portage la Prairie): Mr. Speaker, this House may recall in the fall session that we asked about this government's clawback of the Children's Special Allowance, paid by the federal government to the First Nations agencies.

Despite having no agreements in place with the First Nations agencies, this government continues to claw back these federal dollars, whose purpose, and I quote, whose exclusive purpose is the care, maintenance and advancement of children in care. This money goes into general revenue when it's clawed back.

Mr. Speaker, have these illegal, immoral clawbacks impacted these agencies and left them vulnerable?

Hon. Kerri Irvin-Ross (Minister of Family Services): I'm proud to speak today around what we have done to support indigenous organizations and agencies across this province that support families off reserve and on reserve.

What we have been able to do is we have tripled their funding. We have continued to support them through devolution. We have continued to work with them on developing prevention models to reduce what is a national crisis, the number of children that in care. We have a responsibility to reduce that number. We are starting to see that trend change here in Manitoba, but we're not stopping. We have a lot more work to do, and we're committed to do that with all of our indigenous partners. With the introduction of customary care, that is a game changer across this province. People are watching to see what the communities, the indigenous communities, are going to do and how we're going to continue to work together.

Mr. Wishart: Mr. Speaker, this minister's prevention budget is less than 8 per cent of her total budget.

Due to this government's repeated clawbacks of the CSA, agencies have been forced to work underresourced and are reaching a breaking point. Because of this government's clawbacks, Nelson House agency, one of the—that has shown most of the consistent reduction in the number of kids in care and runs a highly successful, innovative preventive program, will be forced to lay off front-line workers.

How can an agency that has shown such positive results in reductions of children in care be a target for clawbacks by—of funding by this government?

Ms. Irvin-Ross: What this side of the House is continuing to do is to work on the devolution of child welfare, returning it back to the indigenous people so it is culturally appropriate, so it respects traditions. That is what's important.

We know what the members across feel about devolution. It is very clear how they feel about devolution, and people should be very afraid, afraid of their past record, of their reckless cuts, how they slash subsidies, how they didn't support youth when they were 16 years old, turned them to the street, reduced funding for people with children with complex needs. That is worrisome.

What we need to keep doing is to work on a prevention to keep ensuring that we are supporting the front-line staff, so, yes, that Felix Walker and the staff at Nelson House can continue to do their good work. We continue to work with them on a daily basis.

Mr. Speaker: Order, please. The honourable minister's time has elapsed for this question.

The honourable member for Portage la Prairie, with a final supplementary.

Mr. Wishart: Mr. Speaker, prior to this government's new funding arrangement, one the northern agencies have never agreed to, some agencies held half of the CSA money in trust for children in care, and the other half was used to fund foster parents and the benefit of children.

Agencies have been historically underfunded by this government and have often been in a position to run deficits, and this government's solution to these deficits was to force the agencies to use this children's trust money that had been set aside for these children when they reached 18, to use that money to balance the books.

How does this government steal the future of these most vulnerable children and call that fair?

Ms. Irvin-Ross: Mr. Speaker, this government works very closely with indigenous leadership, with families, with communities to ensure that we are providing the resources that are necessary that they can support their children, address the issues of poverty, making sure that they have good quality housing, make sure that there is good quality education, make sure that there is a not-for-profit child-care system so their child can access a space while making sure that their family can have a job while we work on our economy.

I am extremely proud of the work that we've done. We have a lot more work to do, like many other jurisdictions across this province, but we have a plan, a plan to invest in prevention. We are currently in negotiations with the federal government around our funding model. We are looking to the federal government to support a funding model that improves prevention funding across Canada. Thank you.

Department Funding Government Record

Hon. Jon Gerrard (River Heights): Mr. Speaker, while the NDP government has been spending wildly

in some areas, it has been aggressively cutting in other priority areas. In agriculture, for example, there have been major cuts of almost 50 per cent over the last few years to agri-industry development and advancement, an area important to Manitoba's economic growth.

I ask: What other priority areas of our economy will the NDP government be slashing this year, or will the government try to hide the information by not bringing in a budget?

Hon. Greg Dewar (Minister of Finance): Mr. Speaker, we're so eager to get up today that—but I do want to just remind the House, as we—what we stated earlier on yesterday, that on March the 8th we're going to be presenting a fiscal update to this House.

* (14:20)

And I want to just make a reference to the Liberals and the Liberal leader who joins us as well. The member for River Heights, he's forced to do the bidding of his Liberal leader, and I must feel—I do feel sorry for him as he—as the Liberal leader moves the Liberal Party to the hard right. You know, they made it known to Manitobans that part of their plank is to cut \$470 million out of our revenue base, give a corporate giveaway to the largest banks, corporations that are making \$35 billion in profit.

We're on the side of Manitobans; they're on the side of the big banks.

Mr. Gerrard: Mr. Speaker, I'm proud of the Liberal plan to create jobs and economic growth.

Mr. Speaker, what the NDP say on the environment, for example, certainly doesn't match their actions. The government has made drastic cuts to budgets for environmental issues, including big cuts to water stewardship, to biodiversity and land use, to parks and regional services. Indeed, over 90 per cent of the agri-environment budget has been cut by the NDP government over the last four years.

I ask the NDP, are they going to continue their lip service and hypocrisy on environmental issues while cutting deeply into the necessary resources this coming year as well, or will they hide because they don't bring in a budget?

Hon. Thomas Nevakshonoff (Minister of Conservation and Water Stewardship): I thank the member for the question, gives me the opportunity to put the Liberal record on the environment on the table here.

And a function of the environment is climate change, Mr. Speaker, and climate change is playing out by floods and so forth, and this government steps up when it comes to mitigating that flood, addressing those infrastructure needs.

The Liberal Party, their platform states that they will not proceed with infrastructure works to mitigate flooding until such time in the future, the indefinite future when the budget balances. They don't care about Aboriginal people in this province. They don't care about flooding. They don't care about climate change. They don't care about the mitigation necessary to address climate change. That's the Liberal platform on environment.

Thank you.

Mr. Gerrard: Mr. Speaker, I have no comment on the bizarre outburst that we've just heard.

Mr. Speaker, the Premier (Mr. Selinger) and his NDP government have made substantial cuts in areas as diverse as Northern and Aboriginal Affairs, Multiculturalism and Literacy, and Tourism, Culture and Heritage. The Premier has been slicing and dicing. One thing is clear: These areas are not a priority for the Premier's so-called investments.

I ask: Does the NDP government plan to continue to slash investments in these vital areas and neglect them as it has done in the last several years, or will the NDP hide behind not bringing in a real budget?

Mr. Dewar: Mr. Speaker, as I said on the—on March the 8th we'll have a robust fiscal update for the House, and I know then the—all Manitobans will have a chance to see the spending priorities of this government.

As I said yesterday, it'll draw a sharp contrast between this government that believes in investing in health care and education, Mr. Speaker, and infrastructure, versus the opposition; they want to fire 1,000 nurses, 700 teachers.

And the Liberal Party, Mr. Speaker, want to give corporate tax cuts to the wealthy, to the top 5 per cent businesses in this province—five—\$471-million tax giveaway to the banks that are making \$35 billion in profit.

This government believes in small business. That is why—Mr. Speaker, small business, they're the generator of jobs in this economy. That is why we are the first and only province in Canada to have

eliminated the small business tax. That member voted against it.

Elections Funding Donor Limits

Mr. Rob Altemeyer (Wolseley): I—my question today is to my honourable colleague, the Minister of Health. I'm wondering if she could maybe inform that House of efforts we've made to put a limit on the influence of big money in elections in Manitoba. Apparently, we have a crisis of democracy in this province.

The Leader of the Opposition yesterday announced that he wanted to get rid of the spending limit which caps individual donations at \$3,000. Oddly enough, living in the inner city I do not have thousands of constituents marching to my office door demanding the right to make money more important than citizens in an election. This is new for me.

I guess, MLA will no longer mean Member of the Legislative Assembly. It will stand for member for liquid assets. Maybe the ministers will all be ministers for money. It's a crisis I was not aware of.

Billionaires—

Mr. Speaker: Order, please. The honourable member's time has elapsed.

Hon. Sharon Blady (Minister of Health): I thank the member for the question.

Mr. Speaker, our NDP government believes that democracy shouldn't be a question of who has the wealthiest friends with the deepest pockets. That's why we banned union and corporate donations, because we believe every Manitoban's vote should count, something that members opposite voted against. The Conservatives want to return to the days when their wealthy friends could endlessly bankroll their campaigns. Regular hard-working Manitobans can't afford to spend thousands of dollars on political donations. Hard-working Manitobans also cannot afford the Opposition Leader's American-style plans for two-tier health care and two-tier democracy.

First Street Bridge Project CP Rail Access Agreement

Mr. Reg Helwer (Brandon West): Mr. Speaker, in January, people crossing the First Street Bridge in Brandon noticed that there were no workers nor equipment working on or around the bridge. They began to ask questions and found that the minister

responsible for MIT had failed yet again. He had failed to negotiate an access agreement with CP Rail.

Mr. Speaker, I think it's a little obvious that you should talk to a railway before you begin demolition of a bridge over their main rail line. I know the minister is still learning, though, you know. The Premier (Mr. Selinger) thought the minister had learned a lesson on the Tiger Dam cover-up, and now he apparently needs to learn again—talking about democracy and friends, I don't know.

Mr. Speaker, how many millions of dollars has this latest learning experience cost the Manitoba taxpayer?

Hon. Steve Ashton (Minister of Infrastructure and Transportation): Well, Mr. Speaker, I think the most relevant part of that question was when the member for Brandon West talked about no workers working on a job site. The difference, of course, is that would be what they would put in place in terms of infrastructure if they were in government.

I'd remind people, Mr. Speaker, that when they were in government, their entire capital budget for the year was \$90 million. Last year—and we've already, by the way, had the best construction year in history; it exceeded \$700 million.

And if the member for Brandon West would like a tour, Mr. Speaker, perhaps on his way back home I can show him some of the places. Maybe he's forgotten Highway 1. Maybe the areas in Brandon, maybe in Westman he's forgotten.

But that's the different. I remind people once again: we are the get 'er done government; they're the shut 'er down opposition.

Mr. Helwer: Mr. Speaker, the Premier announced the First Street Bridge project without the knowledge of the minister for MIT, without the knowledge of the MLA for Brandon East, and the Province proceeded with this project without any federal infrastructure matching dollars.

Manitobans are tired of paying more and getting less. When the minister fails to follow the basic step of talking to a railroad, it raises a lot of questions about the minister's lack of management ability.

How many millions of dollars has this failure cost Manitoba taxpayers, what else has the minister forgotten, and why is he still minister?

Hon. Drew Caldwell (Minister of Municipal Government): Mr. Speaker, over my quarter of a

century of being an elected official in Brandon both at city council and at the—in the provincial Legislature here, I have never ever encountered a politician in the city of Brandon that day in and day out puts the interests of Brandon dead last in every single file—every single file.

Mr. Speaker, the member from Brandon 'est' has jeopardized consistently in this Legislature, consistency in his community, the relocation of Assiniboine Community College to Brandon's North Hill. He has voted against seniors housing. He has voted against Brandon University. He has voted against, has not supported flood protection in Brandon. There's not a single elected official I have ever worked with in my entire career that has put the interests of Brandon dead last every single time.

Mr. Speaker, the member for Brandon West (Mr. Helwer) is a Republican Tea Party-style politician. He—

Mr. Speaker: Order, please. The honourable minister's time on this question has elapsed.

Time for oral questions has expired.

*(14:30)

PETITIONS

Mr. Speaker: Now, time for petitions.

Applied Behavioural Analysis Services

Mr. Stuart Briese (Agassiz): I wish to present the following petition to the Legislative Assembly of Manitoba.

The background for this petition is as follows:

(1) The provincial government broke a commitment to support families of children with a diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder, including timely diagnosis and access to necessary treatment such as applied behavioural analysis, also known as ABA services.

(2) The provincial government did not follow its own policy statement on autism services, which notes the importance of early intervention and ABA therapy for children with autism.

(3) The preschool waiting list for ABA services has reached its highest level ever with at least 68 children waiting for services. That number is expected to exceed 148 children by September 2016 despite commitments to reduce the waiting list and provide timely access to services.

(4) The current provincial government policy now imposed on the ABA service provider will decrease the scientifically-proven, empirically based and locally proven program and force children to go to school at age five before they are ready, thus not allowing them full access to ABA services promised them as they wait for their—wait on their wait-list.

(5) Waiting lists, forced decrease in service and denials of treatment are unacceptable. No child should be denied access to or age out of eligibility for ABA services.

We petition the Legislative Assembly of Manitoba as follows:

To request the ministers of Family Services, Education and Advanced Learning and Health consider making funding available to address the current waiting list for ABA services.

This petition is signed by D. Sewell, G. Morris, M. Bankert and many, many other fine Manitobans.

Mr. Speaker: In keeping with our rule 132(6), when petitions are read they are deemed to have been received by the House.

Community-Based Brain Injury Services and Supports

Mrs. Bonnie Mitchelson (River East): I wish to present the following petition to the Legislative Assembly.

The background to this petition is as follows:

(1) Brain Injury Canada, cited at <http://braininjurycanada.ca/acquired-brain-injury/>, estimates that 50,000 Canadians sustain brain injuries each year; over 1 million Canadians live with the effects of an acquired brain injury; 30 per cent of all traumatic brain injuries are sustained by children and youth, and approximately 50 per cent of brain injuries come from falls and motor vehicle collisions.

(2) Studies conducted by Manitoba Health in 2003 and 2006, and in the Brandon Regional Health Authority in 2008, identified the need for community-based brain-injury services.

(3) These studies recommended that Manitoba adopt the Saskatchewan model of brain-injury services.

(4) The treatment and coverage for Manitobans who suffer from brain injuries varies greatly,

resulting in huge inadequacies depending upon whether a person suffers the injury at work, in a motor vehicle accident, through assault or from medical issues such as a stroke, aneurysm or anoxia due to cardiac arrest or other medical reasons.

(5) Although in-patient services including acute care, short- and longer-term rehabilitation are available throughout the province, brain injury patients who are discharged from hospital often experience discontinuation or great reduction of services which results in significant financial and emotional burdens being placed on family and friends.

We petition the Legislative Assembly of Manitoba as follows:

(1) To urge the provincial government to develop and evolve community-based brain-injury services that include but are not limited to: case management services, known also as service navigation; safe and accessible housing in the community; proctor or coach-type assistance for community reintegration programs; improved access to community-based rehabilitation services and improved transportation, especially for people living in rural Manitoba, and

(2) To urge the provincial government to encompass financial and emotional supports for families and other caregivers in the model that is developed.

Mr. Speaker, this petition is signed by N. Baxell, C. Solon, M. Caslake and many, many other fine Manitobans.

Manitoba Interlake—Request to Repair and Reopen Provincial Roads 415 and 416

Mr. Blaine Pedersen (Midland): I wish to present the following petition to the Legislative Assembly.

These are the reasons for this petition:

The Interlake region is an important transportation corridor for Manitoba but, unfortunately, is still dealing with serious underinvestment in infrastructure under this provincial government.

Provincial roads 415 and 416 are vital to the region but have still not been repaired or reopened since sustaining damages during the 2010 flood.

Residents and businesses in the Manitoba Interlake are seriously impacted and inconvenienced

by having no adequate east-west travel routes over an area of 525 square miles.

This lack of east-west travel routes is also a major public safety concern, as emergency response vehicles are impeded from arriving in a timely manner.

We petition the Legislative Assembly of Manitoba as follows:

To urge that the provincial government repair and reopen the provincial roads 415 and 416 to allow adequate east-west travel in the Interlake.

And this petition is signed by J. Chaboyer, R. Desjarlais, B. Fossay and many more fine Manitobans.

Provincial Trunk Highway 206 and Cedar Avenue in Oakbank—Pedestrian Safety

Mr. Ron Schuler (St. Paul): Mr. Speaker, I wish to present the following petition to the Legislative Assembly of Manitoba.

The background to this petition is as follows:

(1) Every day, hundreds of Manitoba children walk to school in Oakbank and must cross PTH 206 at the intersection with Cedar Avenue.

(2) There have been many dangerous incidents where drivers use the right shoulder to pass vehicles that have stopped at the traffic light waiting to turn left at this intersection.

(3) Law enforcement officials have identified this intersection as a hot spot of concern for the safety of schoolchildren, drivers and emergency responders.

We petition the Legislative Assembly of Manitoba as follows:

To urge that the provincial government improve the safety at the pedestrian corridor at the intersection of PTH 206 and Cedar Avenue in Oakbank by considering such steps as highlighting pavement markings to better indicate the location of the shoulders and crosswalk, as well as installing a lighted crosswalk structure.

This is signed by M. Rowan, B. Kinkowski, S. Rowan and many, many other fine Manitobans.

Interlake Emergency Room Staffing

Mr. Ralph Eichler (Lakeside): Mr. Speaker, I wish to present the following petition to the Legislative Assembly of Manitoba.

The background to this petition is as follows:

There is a severe shortage of emergency and regular medical care in the Interlake region of Manitoba.

Staffing levels within such units such as hemodialysis, chemotherapy, emergency–outpatient services at the Johnson Memorial Hospital in Gimli are below operational levels.

This lack of essential front-line services is causing patients to travel 45 minutes away for regular and emergency lifesaving treatments, often at their own expense.

This highway medicine approach places the welfare of residents and visitors to this community at further risk.

This shortage creates additional strain to the limited rural ambulance services and results in all Manitobans paying more and getting less.

We petition the Legislative Assembly of Manitoba as follows:

To urge the provincial government to consider implementing a plan to cover the immediate shortfall in staffing levels and develop a long-term solution to provide timely and quality health care to the residents in the Interlake.

This petition is submitted on behalf of S. Lywak, B. Lywak, J. Tesarski and many other fine Manitobans.

Budget 2016

Mrs. Myrna Driedger (Charleswood): Mr. Speaker, I wish to present the following petition to the Legislative Assembly.

The background to this petition is as follows:

On April 30th, 2015, the Finance Minister clearly stated, and I quote: There will be another budget before the next election. End quote.

The provincial government conducted budget consultations with Manitobans at significant taxpayer expense with the clear understanding there would be another budget before the next election.

Just two days after the Public Accounts for fiscal year 2014-2015 were released, showing the provincial government's deficit had ballooned by an additional \$100 million more than budgeted, the Finance Minister stated, and I quote: I'm sorry I wasn't clear, but the fact of the matter is we're

weighing our options as to whether or not to introduce a budget prior to the election. End quote.

* (14:40)

After months of misleading Manitobans, on February 4th, 2016, the provincial government finally admitted they would withhold the budget.

Manitobans deserve to have access to complete information regarding the true state of the provincial government's fiscal mismanagement.

The budget has been prepared, but the provincial government is hiding it and the facts from Manitoba instead of being transparent and accountable.

We petition the Legislative Assembly of Manitoba as follows:

To urge the provincial government keep its promise to the people of Manitoba and immediately bring forward the completed budget they are withholding from public scrutiny.

And this is signed by J. Myska, B. Dodds, D. Chase and many others, Mr. Speaker.

Community-Based Brain Injury Services and Supports

Mr. Shannon Martin (Morris): Mr. Speaker, I wish to present the following petition to the Legislative Assembly.

The background of this petition is as follows:

(1) Brain Injury Canada, cited at <http://braininjurycanada.ca/acquired-brain-injury/>, estimates that 50,000 Canadians sustain brain injuries each year, over 1 million Canadians live with the effects—an acquired brain injury, 30 per cent of all traumatic brain injuries are sustained by children and youth, and approximately 50 per cent of brain injuries come from falls and motor vehicle collisions.

(2) Studies conducted by Manitoba Health in 2003 and 2006 and the Brandon Regional Health Authority in 2008 identified the need for community-based brain injury services.

(3) These studies recommended that Manitoba adopt the Saskatchewan model of brain injury services.

(4) The treatment and coverage for Manitobans who suffer brain injuries varies greatly, resulting in huge inadequacies depending on whether a person suffers the injury at work, in a motor vehicle accident, through assault or from medical issues such

as a stroke, aneurysm or anoxia due to cardiac arrest or other medical reasons.

(5) Although in-patient services, including acute care, short- and longer term rehabilitation, are available throughout the province, brain injury patients who are discharged from hospital often experience discontinuation or great reduction of services with results in significant financial and emotional burdens being placed on family and friends.

We petition the Legislative Assembly of Manitoba as follows:

(1) To urge the provincial government to develop and evolve community-based brain injury services that include but are not limited to: case management services, known also as service navigation; safe and accessible housing in the community; proctor or coach-type assistance for community reintegration programs; improved access to community-based rehabilitation services; and improved transportation, especially for people living in rural Manitoba.

(2) To urge the provincial government to encompass financial and emotional supports for families and other caregivers in the model that is developed.

And this petition, Mr. Speaker, is signed by C. Bourns, K. Mistal and R. Stevenson and many other fine, fine Manitobans.

Thank you.

Minnesota-Manitoba Transmission Line Route— Information Request

Mr. Dennis Smook (La Verendrye): I wish to present the following petition to the Legislative Assembly of Manitoba.

The background to this petition is as follows:

(1) The Minnesota-Manitoba transmission line is a 500-kilovolt alternating-current transmission line set to be located in southeastern Manitoba that will cross into the US border south of Piney, Manitoba.

(2) The line has an in-service date of 2020 and will run approximately 150 kilometres with tower heights expected to reach between 40 and 60 metres and be located every four to five hundred metres.

(3) The preferred route designated for the line will see hydro towers come in close proximity to the community of La Broquerie and many other

communities in Manitoba's southeast rather than an alternate route that was also considered.

(4) The alternate route would have seen the line run further east, avoid densely populated areas and eventually terminate at the same spot at the US border.

(5) The Progressive Conservative caucus has repeatedly asked for information about the routing of the line and its proximity to densely populated areas and has yet to receive any response.

(6) Landowners across Manitoba are concerned about the impact hydro line routing could have on land values.

We petition the Legislative Assembly of Manitoba as follows:

To urge the Minister responsible for Manitoba Hydro to immediately provide a written explanation to all members of the Legislative Assembly regarding what criteria were used and the reasons for selecting the preferred routing for the Minnesota-Manitoba transmission line, including whether or not this routing represented the least intrusive option to residents of Taché, Springfield, Ste. Anne, Stuartburn, Piney and La Broquerie.

This petition is signed by T. Fast, K. Bell, J. Fehr and many more fine Manitobans.

Budget 2016

Mr. Doyle Pivniuk (Arthur-Virden): Mr. Speaker, I wish to present the following petition to the Legislative Assembly of Manitoba.

The background for this petition is as follows:

(1) On April 30, 2015, the Finance Minister clearly stated there will be another budget before the next election.

(2) The provincial government conducted budget consultations with Manitobans at significant taxpayer expense, with the clear understanding that there will be another budget before the next election.

(3) Just two days after the Public Accounts for fiscal year 2014-2015 were released, showing the provincial government's deficit had ballooned by an additional \$100 million more than budgeted, the Finance Minister stated: I'm sorry, I wasn't clear. But, in fact, of the matter is we're weighing our options as whether or not to introduce a budget prior to the election.

(4) After months of misleading Manitobans, on February 4th, 2016, the provincial government finally admitted they would withhold the budget.

(5) Manitobans deserve to have access to complete information regarding the true state of provincial government's fiscal mismanagement.

(6) The budget has been prepared, but the provincial government is hiding it and the facts for Manitobans instead of being transparent and accountable.

We petition the Legislative Assembly of Manitoba as follows:

To urge the provincial government to keep its promise to the people of Manitoba and immediately bring forward a complete budget they are withholding from public scrutiny.

And this petition is signed by: F. Van Den Hoeb, C. Steele and O. Hanson and many fine Manitobans.

Beausejour District Hospital–Weekend and Holiday Physician Availability

Mr. Wayne Ewasko (Lac du Bonnet): I wish to present the following petition to the Legislative Assembly.

And these are the reasons for this petition:

(1) The Beausejour District Hospital is a 30-bed, acute-care facility that serves the communities of Beausejour and Brokenhead.

(2) The hospital and the primary-care centre have had no doctor available on weekends and holidays for many months, jeopardizing the health and livelihoods of those in the northeast region of the Interlake-Eastern Regional Health Authority.

(3) During the 2011 election, the provincial government promised to provide every Manitoban with access to a family doctor by 2015.

(4) This promise is far from being realized, and Manitobans are witnessing many emergency rooms limiting services or closing temporarily, with the majority of these reductions taking place in rural Manitoba.

(5) According to the Health Council of Canada, only 25 per cent of doctors in Manitoba reported that their patients had access to care on evenings and weekends.

We petition the Legislative Assembly of Manitoba as follows:

To urge the provincial government and the Minister of Health to ensure that the Beausejour District Hospital and primary-care centre have a primary-care physician available on weekends and holidays to better provide area residents within this—with this essential service.

* (14:50)

This petition is signed by L. Bush, L. Vallee, C. Harrison and many more fine Manitobans.

Mr. Speaker: I believe that concludes petitions.

House Business

Mr. Speaker: The honourable Official Opposition House Leader (Mr. Goertzen), on House business.

Mr. Kelvin Goertzen (Official Opposition House Leader): On House business, Mr. Speaker.

In accordance with rule 31(9), I'd like to announce that the private member's resolution that'll be considered on Thursday, March 3rd, is the resolution on broken trust means higher hydro rates, sponsored by the honourable member for Lakeside (Mr. Eichler).

Mr. Speaker: It has been announced that, in keeping with rule 31(9), that the private member's resolution that will be considered next Thursday on March the 3rd is the resolution on broken trust means higher hydro rates, sponsored by the honourable member for Lakeside.

Any further House business? No, okay. We'll now call grievances.

ORDERS OF THE DAY

(Continued)

GOVERNMENT BUSINESS

Mr. Speaker: Seeing no grievances, we'll move on to orders of the day, government business.

Hon. Dave Chomiak (Government House Leader): Mr. Speaker, we'd like to call Bill 15, customary care; and then, after that, debate on second reading of Bill 4, constructing Freedom Road; then second reading on Bill 3, post-secondary sexual violence and harassment policies; Bill 5, Surface Water Management Act; Bill 6, Francophone Community Enhancement and Support Act and Bill 17, The Manitoba Teachers' Society Act.

Mr. Speaker: We'll be calling bills in the following order: starting with second reading of Bill 15, and then debate on second readings of Bill 4, followed by

second reading of Bill 3, and then second readings of Bill 5, Bill 6 and Bill 17.

SECOND READINGS

Bill 15—The Child and Family Services Amendment Act (Recognition of Customary Care of Indigenous Children)

Mr. Speaker: And we'll proceed to start with second readings of Bill 15, The Child and Family Services Amendment Act (Recognition of Customary Care of Indigenous Children), standing in the name in the honourable Minister of Family Services.

Hon. Kerri Irvin-Ross (Minister of Family Services): Mr. Speaker, I move, seconded by the Minister of Mineral Resources (Mr. Chomiak), that Bill 15, The Child and Family Services Amendment Act, be now read a second time and be referred to the committee of this House.

Her Honour the Lieutenant Governor has been advised of this bill, and I table the message.

Mr. Speaker: It's been moved by the honourable Minister of Family Services, seconded by the honourable Minister of Mineral Resources, that Bill 15, The Child and Family Services Amendment Act (Recognition of Customary Care of Indigenous Children), be now read for a second time and be referred to a committee of the House.

And the message from the Lieutenant Governor has been tabled.

Ms. Irvin-Ross: Mr. Speaker, on today, which I believe to be an extremely historic day, as this government introduced Bill 18, the truth and reconciliation act, as well as just down the road two blocks we have national leaders meeting and discussing the tragedy of missing and murdered indigenous women and girls and working on solutions in how we move forward.

So today I stand before my honourable colleagues to speak about Bill 15. This bill introduces amendments to The Child and Family Services Act that will enable indigenous communities, including First Nations, Metis and Inuit communities, to exercise greater control over the care of their children.

Through the introduction of this bill, we are seeking a monumental change to the child-welfare system, where government steps aside and reaffirms the rights of indigenous communities in Manitoba to assert responsibility for the care and protection of the

indigenous children. Through this bill, we are answering the calls to action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, that governments provide adequate resources to enable Aboriginal communities and child-welfare organizations to keep Aboriginal families together where it is safe to do so and to keep children in culturally appropriate environments, regardless of where they reside.

Mr. Speaker, this bill—with this bill, we are enshrining the legislation the best practices cited within Commissioner Ted Hughes's report on the Phoenix Sinclair inquiry related to community rights and responsibilities to decide what is the best for its children and the importance of community-developed solutions and community-based services.

Through this bill, we have endeavoured to undertake the recommendations in the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs' report, Bringing Our Children Home. The AMC report recommended that we explore and develop new service delivery models and ensure children remain in their home community, citing customary care as a model for consideration. I am pleased to be bringing this bill respecting customary care forward for consideration.

Mr. Speaker, in November 2003, through the Aboriginal Justice Inquiry Child Welfare Initiative, Manitoba was the first province in which First Nation and Métis people acquired province-wide authority and responsibility for their own child and family services system. As part of our ongoing commitment to the AJI we are proud to introduce amendments that provide for customary care.

Introducing customary care is another historic step in the recognition and affirmation of indigenous people's rights in Manitoba. The bill creates an additional care option for indigenous children, families and communities involved with the child-welfare system. It will change our approach to how we provide child and family services in Manitoba.

Customary care is not new to indigenous communities. Customary care is understood by indigenous communities as a traditional method of caring for children, premised on the belief that a child is the collective responsibility of the community. What's new is that this bill will provide a legislative basis for the provision of customary care to indigenous children in need of protection with financial and social work supports from CFS, recognizing the importance of preserving cultural identity for indigenous children, families and communities. We have also required that kinship

placements be considered first when out-of-home care is required for the safety of the child.

Under customary care legislation, indigenous communities, in collaboration with Child and Family Services agencies, will take the lead in child-welfare planning and decision-making. The direct involvement of the indigenous community in care planning will strengthen the provision of culturally appropriate care, supports and services for indigenous children and families.

Under the new legislation, when an indigenous child becomes involved with the child-welfare system, all relevant parties will be invited to come together to design a care plan for the child and family. The relevant parties will include parents, guardians, indigenous community representatives, Child and Family Services agency staff, and, in some cases, a customary care giver with whom a child may need to live under a customary care agreement. Notably, customary care givers will receive the same financial support as a foster parent when children reside with them.

One of the most important aspects of customary care is that it ensures that parents or guardians who participate in customary care agreements maintain guardianship even though their child lives with the customary care giver. This is a significant departure from the existing act, where a Child and Family Services agency becomes a guardian of a child in foster care. Through this change we strengthen an indigenous child's connection to family and community. In particular, the bill will maintain and enhance the important bond between a parent and a child, even in the most challenging of situations.

In supporting these positive connections the emphasis on engaging children and their families in programming and services will support improved outcomes for children and for families who are healing.

The bill also makes it possible for a judge to reserve a protection order in favour of a customary care arrangement, returning a child to their community. Customary care arrangements do not require legislative time limits on their duration, another noteworthy departure from the existing act, which currently limits how long children can remain in out-of-home placements before becoming permanent wards of Child and Family Services.

These proposed changes demonstrate the increased understanding that family healing takes

time. The changes also encourage collaborative planning for healing, family reunification, and community connection and reconnection for families.

We recognize that indigenous communities each have unique care approaches for children and families. The amendments are framed within a very broad definition of customary care to enable communities across this province to collaborate with CFS agencies in responding to the needs of the children and in developing customary care approaches that work within the community's own context.

Customary care will be phased in throughout Manitoba beginning immediately—the Opaskwayak Cree Nation Child and Family Services, Island Lake First Nations Family Services, Sandy Bay Child and Family Services, Dakota and Ojibway Child and Family Services, Nelson House Family Services, West Region Child and Family Services.

The history of colonization and child apprehensions by a modern-day child-welfare system are closely intertwined. It is with great pride that I introduce this legislation, as I believe it will play a key role in breaking the cycle of intergenerational trauma.

Before I conclude, Mr. Speaker, I'd like to say a word of thanks to the indigenous leadership who drive the consultative process, ensuring that each First Nations community has the support they need to implement this new legislation.

*(15:00)

I thank them for acknowledging that this bill is a great opportunity to bring about much needed change within the child and family services system. I value the views that have been shared with me throughout the development of this bill and have great respect for the concern that they have shown for their communities and for the safety and well-being of the children from their communities.

This bill opens the door for us to work collaboratively and diligently to realize the potential held by recognizing customary care for indigenous families in Manitoba. Together we must ensure that we empower indigenous communities and leadership and their respective Child and Family Services agencies to develop community-based models of customary care.

Mr. Speaker, I believe that I speak for all honourable members of this Assembly when I

acknowledge that too many indigenous children have come into provincial care in Manitoba. I ask each of you to join in our efforts to change the future legacy of First Nations, Metis and Inuit children in our province through this legislation that allows the provision of customary care.

Mr. Speaker: Further debate on this matter—any questions, pardon me, questions?

Mr. Ian Wishart (Portage la Prairie): Mr. Speaker, I would ask the minister to begin, perhaps, in general here, by defining for us all how she views customary care differing greatly from foster care in particular?

Ms. Irvin-Ross: Customary care is drastically different from foster—a child that's placed in foster care. A child that's placed in foster care is a child in care. Customary care plan is the custom of the community. We will have the potential of having 64 different customary care communities across Manitoba and more as we work with the Metis communities and the Inuit.

Each community will define what their customary care plan will be. It will include the professionals in the community, it will include the elders. It will include the indigenous leadership and the families that will come up with what the plan is.

What's really important with this act is it will ensure that parents maintain guardianship. Parents will always have a seat at the table. Parents will always be a part of that plan.

So the process for a family to become involved is one that is community-based. And I think that that is significantly different than the system that we have.

Mr. Wishart: I thank the minister for her answer.

As the minister knows and actually referred to, we have seven distinct indigenous groups in Manitoba. And under the act, the minister has the power and discretion to define what is an indigenous community.

I wonder if she'd like to share with us how she plans on defining what's an indigenous community.

Ms. Irvin-Ross: When I made the reference to the 64 communities, I was speaking of the 64 First Nations communities that are recognized. They are all Manitobans. They are a part, and an important part of the fabric of our communities, but they are distinct communities.

But we also have a responsibility when we're working with the Metis and the Inuit. Customary care is a tradition of First Nation families, but we believe that customary care will also be very beneficial within the Metis and the Inuit communities. So we need to be able to work with the leadership of the MMF, as well as with the leadership of the Inuit community, and talk about how they define the boundaries of their community, which is far—is vastly different than how the definitions are for First Nations communities. So that allows us to have the flexibility. It will be done always within consultation with indigenous leaderships and with the communities themselves. This is providing more opportunities for families to get the support that they need so they can keep their children in their homes and in their communities and be a part of their traditions.

Mr. Wishart: And, following up on that, the minister has made reference to the leadership that she will be consulting with. Could she be a little more specific about exactly what she views as the leadership of the community?

Ms. Irvin-Ross: There are multiple layers of consultation that need to occur with the implementation of this act. The consultation that I have been involved in has happened at what we call the leadership council. And that includes Grand Chief Nepinak from the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs. That includes President Chartrand from the Manitoba Metis Federation. That includes Grand Chief Nelson from the Southern Chiefs' Organization. It now includes Sheila North Wilson from MKO, as well as a Metis woman and as well as the Minister of Family Services. So we have had consultation at that level. But what is vitally important is the consultation that will happen in every local community.

We have had a number of meetings with the board of directors of agencies. The one that I recall the most passionate meeting was when I met with the chiefs from the West Region CFS and their commitment and the way that they spoke about what they saw customary care. Chief Shannacappo, he spoke as a person who's participating as a customary caregiver and talked about the benefit that it provides him and that child.

So there will be consultation that happens at the leadership—indigenous leadership, but then it'll also happen at the local leadership with chiefs and councils, elders and community members as well as service providers for those communities.

Mr. Wishart: I thank the minister for her answer.

She made reference to some already done consultations, and yet in the press we have seen a couple of these leaders that she referred to say there, in fact, hadn't been any consultation on this new bill yet.

Can she explain to us the exact times that she did consult with the example of Derek Nepinak and Sheila North Wilson and Metis leader Chartrand? When has she consulted with them?

Ms. Irvin-Ross: As I have spoken on both—on previous questions is that there are different aspects of consultation. We have had a number of leadership council meetings, and we have had this conversation ongoing. Grand Chief Nepinak has been passionate about customary care and the—as I said in my speaking points, he brought it up and was referenced in *Bringing Our Children Home*. I know that there has been a number of conversations with the Premier (Mr. Selinger) and with myself. So we have had preliminary consultations for what is going to happen with this, which makes it even more important is that the consultation is going to happen in individual communities.

So, yes, there is much more consultation that needs to happen; there are conversations that need to happen because what would be considered customary care in Sagkeeng First Nation may not be what is seen as customary care at Opaskwayak Cree Nation. So we need to make sure that we are providing those opportunities for consultation to happen at all levels. The leadership council, the indigenous leadership that I have cited, we are continuing to have conversations with them about the progress that we are making. I am extremely excited about this. There is a lot of work that has to happen. But we have a commitment to move forward to rolling this out early in the spring into seven communities. It is going to be significant. It is going to make changes for a number of families.

Mr. Wishart: The minister certainly had made reference to ongoing consultations, but they were in general, as certainly the discussion I have had regarding *Bringing Our Children Home*, a document that was put together by the First Nations in this province, and it didn't have the specific details that are available in this Bill 15.

So has she actually spoken about the content of Bill 15 with these groups?

Ms. Irvin-Ross: There is ongoing conversation with the leadership council frequently about this bill and previous bills. We have a good working relationship. We work together keeping children at the centre of the table, not trying to make cheap political shots at all. It is about children in the centre. What do we need to do to support them, to support their families and support their communities? That's the work that we're doing.

I was extremely proud when on December 2nd when many of us, close to 100, I think, gathered at Thunderbird House and announced the introduction of this legislation. It was a proud moment to be surrounded from—by chiefs, a number of chiefs, around 20, I think, that represented the north, the south, the east, the west. It was beautiful, and the hope that we have entrusted in this process. It is a new beginning. It is turning the page. It is opening a door for us to do business differently in this province that is going to be significant.

* (15:10)

I cannot underplay this. It is going to be significant. The opportunities for us to acknowledge the traditional way of customary care and to remove some of the policies that prevent that from happening today, for ensuring that parents sit at the table, that they remain the guardian and the caregiver for that child, they are part of the decision making; that is so significant. That is going to ensure that a child, if their family is in crisis, they will still have that sense of belonging. They will still know who they are. They will still know their parents. They will still be protected in their community. That is very significant.

Mr. Wishart: I appreciate the comments. I am a great fan of pilot projects. I've proposed a number in the past, in various other areas. I wondered how the minister selected the six First Nations that she chose for pilot projects in this case.

Ms. Irvin-Ross: I want to make it very clear to all honourable members in this House that this is not a pilot project, that we are introducing legislation that is significantly going to change what is going to happen in this province for indigenous children under *The Child and Family Services Act*. This is, by far, not a pilot project. This is significant change that is happening.

We are starting with these seven communities. These communities were chosen; some of them have approached us. They were chosen in consultation

with the great folks that I work with in the Department of Family Services. They identified them as leaders within the child-welfare system, as people that were interested in working on a customary care model.

We are extremely excited. We know that there is anticipation by the community members, by the leadership, of the opportunity that this is going to provide.

Hon. Jon Gerrard (River Heights): I'm looking for a little bit of clarification in this. My understanding is that the bill provides that the minister can designate what is an indigenous community and, by implication, what is not an indigenous community, and that some communities will be designated indigenous and others will be left out.

Now I presume that the minister is trying to designate a community as being ready for customary care. What will the minister judge in terms of whether a community is ready to deliver customary care?

Ms. Irvin-Ross: Mr. Speaker, once this bill has been—gone to committee and is passed, the third reading and has royal assent, it will be—communities will be able to say that they want to implement customary care. Yes, there will have to be consultation that happens within their community to define what it means. This bill is extremely broad, but necessarily so, because of the uniqueness and the diversity of communities. As I had spoken earlier to the member opposite, that First Nations communities are very clearly defined. For the Metis and the Inuit, they do not have a clear definition. But, by golly, they want to be a part of this. They want to be a part of having these opportunities of customary care, and the Metis and the Inuit will tell you that they practise that too; however, their communities are not clearly defined.

And so this amendment in the bill will give us that opportunity to work with communities and indigenous leadership and to define what is an indigenous community in order for it to participate in customary care. That will be significant, I believe, and I think that when I have my conversations with President Chartrand, that it is important that he is at the table and that the Metis people are represented and customary care is an option for them.

And, when I met with the leadership of the Inuit, I heard the same: that they need to be at the table, that they need to be acknowledged as being eligible

to participate in customary care. So this was one of the ways that we could build some bridges to these groups.

I think that there are—we do not have a checklist on communities regarding whether you're customary care ready or not. It is about people wanting to embrace the principles and the values of customary care, and they want to do the work, because it is going to be a lot of work to sit with your community members and define what is your customary care plan and to work with these very difficult family situations that are extremely emotional. I need to make sure that this House understands that we still will have safety as the No. 1 priority for the children.

So customary care is an option, but if customary care is not the option for the particular family or it cannot be agreed upon, we will have to go back and use the other tools that we have within the family services act.

But customary care is, as I've said time and time again, it is a beginning and it is to be celebrated.

Mr. Gerrard: Mr. Speaker, just in follow-up and for some clarity because people have asked me this, in Winnipeg we have, for example, indigenous people living. We have many non-indigenous people living. Will, you know, Ma Mawi be able to deliver customary care? Will Jewish Child and Family Service be able to deliver customary care? What about people from, you know, Sierra Leone or Somali community? What—kind of explain a little bit how this is going to work and how it will work in this—with regard to this bill.

Ms. Irvin-Ross: So our focus is indigenous children significantly, right now at this time as we are implementing customary care, and that is because of the high rate of indigenous children that are in care and we need to focus on that.

But I've had meetings with the leaders of other communities of the newcomer group, and they are talking about customary care and their desire to participate in. We are not closing those doors right now, but right now we need to focus our attention on First Nation, Metis and Inuit children and families and communities and focus on that. And, as we are approached by other communities, we will certainly have those conversations, but it is starting today, and, hopefully, when this bill is passed it will start acknowledging the traditional ways and valuing the traditional ways that First Nations have been doing for generations. And I think that that is significant,

and that is our way of moving forward with reconciliation.

Thank you.

Mr. Speaker: That'll conclude the question period permitted for this bill.

Is there any further debate on this matter?

Mr. Wishart: It's a pleasure to rise and put a few words on the record regarding Bill 15.

This is something that our party has been looking at as well, in particular, driven a lot by Bringing Our Children Home document the First Nations published some time ago. And other jurisdictions in other provinces and territories have been using some form of this for some time, some with fairly good success. And, as we're quite concerned about the ever-rising number of children in care here in Manitoba, we have been looking for alternatives that may actually have been provided at the stronger level of support that needs to be in place to make sure that First Nations groups and First Nations children will get the kind of support that they need so that they can actually succeed.

So we're very interested in the debate that'll arise today and any following debate on this area because we see—we certainly see a problem. I don't think any—that it's any surprise to anyone that if you look at the ever-rising number that has been happening over the last 17 years of this government, number of children in care, that there's been a problem for a while. In fact, ever since devolution, there has certainly been some issues and how well things have been managed. So that does not mean devolution cannot be a very successful process. It becomes more about the management. And, back in 2006 we saw a crisis in management with this government when they had high numbers of kids in hotels and seemed unable to provide service, a level of service not only to the kids they were housing in hotels, but to the kids in the community. And, about the same time, of course, the Phoenix Sinclair crisis arose.

*(15:20)

And it does seem to us that we have been, ever since then, lurching from one crisis to the other in terms of how we have been managing CFS in this province. And, certainly, we have had a lot of people not only impacted directly by CFS, but looking over our shoulder and saying, you know, what's going on here? Why is this working so badly? Why do we have so much—so many problems?

Ms. Jennifer Howard, Deputy Speaker, in the Chair

And, in fact, if I can find the right page here, we've had over 20 kids, actually, during that period of time die in the care of CFS. It's just a very tragic number and far, far too many. In fact, we continue to have suicides at a near record rate in the system, and it is just a very poor example of what can happen. Some of the kids that—of the 20 that died since 2005 alone, include, of course, Tina Fontaine—which was the most recent one—Phoenix Sinclair herself, Gage Guimond, Jaylene Sanderson-Redhead, Breana Belanger, Heaven Traverse, Venecia Shanell Audy, Patsy Demarais, Michael Helgason and Tracia Owen and then Baby Amelia. And, you know, that is only a fraction of what has happened in the system because that does not count many of the suicides that occurred for children in the community, even though they were supposedly under care.

So we clearly have had a crisis situation and, on top of that, we've been seeing a generational issue from one group to the other. We—it's difficult to get numbers, as the Deputy Speaker knows, difficult to get numbers from all the different agencies and track kids and their success rates all the way through. But we have certainly been getting messages from groups like Siloam Mission and some of the other missions about the number of kids that turn out to them and that they get information on. And Siloam Mission actually offered some very well-documented assessments of what was going on generationally. When they showing us numbers that supported the kids that had gone through the CFS system and ended up on their doorstep, sometimes right out of care at 18 plus a day, or some of them several years later after they had been on the street for a while, which certainly didn't add to their quality of life. But they showed us some numbers that suggested 41 per cent of the children they saw actually had at least one parent in the system. So we clearly were not providing—over a period of time we were not providing the types of support that stabilized the situation.

So we are clearly joining this government in looking for other options because the system as it exists now is struggling to succeed in a major way. And so we're certainly open to some suggestions as to what might be done to improve things. The concept of customary care could certainly do that. Many communities are in strong enough position to provide and define what is necessary in terms of the type of structure in the community and to have families in place and to make sure that they have the

supports in the community. But one of the areas that has been identified by the Children's Advocate office is the lack of support for those children in the community that have special needs. And, in particular—and they were very quick to reference this—in particular, rural and remote communities.

And so it'll be a very major challenge that won't—those kids won't go away under a customary care system, and we will need to find a way to make sure that these communities have access to the extra services that these special needs children will need in these communities, and we have not been able to provide it in an adequate way up until now, and though certainly we can look at different alternatives, I saw nothing in the bill that would suggest to me a different approach. In fact, it may leave some of the communities struggling to find these extra services, and I do hope the minister keeps that in mind because I think it would be a very important component to add some type of support structure within her department to make sure that these types of services are found and made available in these rural communities, because it is a challenge for many of these rural communities to find the psychologists and the psychiatrists and the health-care professionals other than that would be necessary in the area of addictions and, in particular, help in these communities.

Now, we've seen some fairly successful, I won't call them pilots, but attempts to do this in Nelson House that have yielded, I think, very promising results, and I certainly encourage that type of model. And it is really a form of customary care that was initiated at the—by the local community, and I certainly would like to applaud them for the work that they have done and the results that they have received. They have clearly shown that they value their children and they are prepared to put a lot of things aside and put children first in their process to make sure that they can put the type of supports in place to help these children. It was very creative of them. They took a different approach. Rather than removing the children from the household, they removed the problem adult and, of course, had to find an alternative housing in the community for the problem adult. And we all know how difficult it is to find housing in many of these rural communities, so that was certainly an initial problem that they dealt with. But then they would make sure that there was someone in place to help deal with the problems in the household and help that household move along

and make sure that the kids had everything that they need.

And one of the real strengths of it is the children were not disrupted. They were not put in crisis. The family had less trauma than they probably did by the removal of the children. And I think all of us have talked to a number of families that have been impacted by CFS in the past, where you find that the trauma of having the children removed from the household, it's very difficult for the children, it's very difficult for the family members that remain in the household and any others. And we've seen, in many cases, family destruction, whether it, you know, whatever end it starts, whether it's the children losing contact with the parents or the parents losing contact with the children or the parents themselves not being able to reconcile what had happened to their family. It has certainly led repeatedly to families that have been destroyed.

So this is certainly a better approach, in our mind, and I hope it can be made to work. With that, of course, becomes the obligation that if you remove the parents, you have to make sure that the parents get access to the help that they need. And that, too, has been a challenge in many of these rural and remote communities, whether it be addictions counselling, whether it be mental health counselling, whether it just be family lifestyle counselling. And, frankly, poverty is a factor in this, as we all know. And poverty in these communities is quite high. And how to deal with poverty in these communities is a societal problem that has many, many different factors involved in it. And we need to look at how we can try and provide supports to deal with that particular issue.

Our ever-increasing rate of child poverty in this province is certainly nothing that any of us should be proud of. And we need to look at ways to try and deal with that, perhaps some different approaches. And I would dare to suggest that the desire to have your family intact might actually be a factor in that, and perhaps that this type of change will help bring families back together. And if we can get families back together, working together, living together and strengthen their desire to move forward, perhaps we can get a little more success in terms of the economic success of that particular family. It's hard to separate these things when you're looking at what's going on.

So, certainly, it is interesting way to approach this. We're looking forward, as I said, to the debate.

We believe that there is a lot of factors that need to be discussed in relation to this.

I guess I would be remiss to not talk a little bit about numbers. We've had some discussion lately about how we count kids in care. And I think it's important that we continue to recognize, even when we're in customary care, that these are children that the Province has some level of responsibility to, whether or not they're counted as children in customary care, as is done in some provinces, whether they call it custom care or they have a number of different—custom adoption issues, in some territories—doesn't really matter what you call it. I do believe it is important that they continue to be counted, the same as children that are placed there in voluntary care. I don't think we should be removing these kids from the total. I think it is important that we recognize we have ongoing obligations to these children. And we have ongoing obligations to many of these family members as well, to make sure that we do what we committed to do in providing the supports to keep that family intact.

* (15:30)

And there's lots of data to suggest that usually if you can get the family back together and working together, that within a couple of years stability can return and that can become a very positive way to move this family forward. But there are plenty of challenges in this, and certainly many of them reach beyond this particular bill. So I think it's important that we make sure that this bill not be operated in isolation. I think we need to bring as many different approaches as possible to provide the supports, and I know it will be a huge challenge to make sure that we have some of these supports in many rural communities.

Even here in this city, for many of the kids in care in the city of Winnipeg, it's going to be difficult to make sure we have the supports in place. If the same approach is taken as has been done in Nelson House, where we moved a parent from a household because of crisis of that individual, where are we going to put them? How are we going to make sure that they have supports? How are we going to keep them in contact with the family? And those types of problems have to be looked at, and I actually think it would be very educational to look at what we do inside the city in one of the early attempts.

And I recognize the minister used the word pilot projects. Perhaps she meant a pilot approach to the whole movement to move to this type of care—

custom care, and I'm sure that that's probably what she had in mind, but we have also the problems that are represented in a big urban centre where tracking people and movement occurs every day, and, of course, there are many challenges that occur in big urban centres that we don't see in rural communities.

But the rural communities still remain one of the problem areas, and making sure that the services are there, making sure that there's stuff for the kids to do in those communities, will be important, but it would be very valuable to keep those children in their homes supported in that form, keep them back in school because we've talked many times about the poor Aboriginal graduation rates that exist in Manitoba and, in particular, some of these rural communities. So anything that we can do to help in this area would certainly be extremely valuable.

Now, I do hope a proper consultation process is undertaken. I know from the member from River Heights' comments that he, too, shares my concern that communities will have issues with the definition of who qualifies and how they qualify. I know that even in the Aboriginal community there's divisions, sometimes that are constructive and sometimes that are not constructive, and it will provide a challenge and perhaps bring some of these communities back together, frankly, to try and deal with this problem.

But I think it's very important that a very valuable consultation process be begun in this process, and the minister says she's had some discussions already and I appreciate that. I think it's important that you don't move too far too fast until you have completed those discussions and make sure that you have these communities on board with you. I think that that's absolutely essential, and make sure that they feel that the right people are part of the process because sometimes in rural communities there is one group that speaks and another group that does, and I think it's important that we get both of these groups on board, not only the ones that want to speak, but the ones that will actually end up doing the work in the community and have success in those communities, because that's what you're going to need. The ones that do will be the ones that are involved.

And I think it will be very, very interesting and very positive for many of the family members to be involved in bringing children up, whether they be grandchildren, nieces and nephews, because we do know that, as it exists right now, we have lots of foster parents that do have some type of kinship

relationship with the foster children in their care. That often strengthens the connections very much and provides better opportunities to keep family connections, to keep the parents as close as possible, but many times we see the parents actually having to leave the community to get the extra services that they're required, and especially the special needs children having to leave the community to get the extra services that they require, and that is not a positive part of the process.

I think it's important to keep them in the community as much as we can, to keep them connected not only to their immediate family, to their parents, but to their peers in the school. One of the factors that keep kids in school is the connection that they have with their friends in school. If you take that away, it is very difficult for them to create new ones and often very devastating to those kids. It leaves them isolated, frankly, probably vulnerable in many ways to mental depression, mental health issues and perhaps even to the suicide side of things. I think it's important that we keep everybody as connected as possible in a community.

Now, we're certainly hopeful that this bill continues to have good discussion, that it continues to get very strong engagement, in many groups in Manitoba, because up until now it doesn't seem to have had a great deal of engagement with many communities. I have spoken to a number of First Nations communities, both to the communities and also to the chief and council, and it is certainly not very much on their radar. They're showing a lot of interest in it, which I think is very positive; however, I think, the process has to be worked through very carefully.

Now, Madam Speaker—excuse me—I think it's important that we make sure that this takes a proper process and that everybody is given their engagement in this, whether or not they would be a part of the current child-welfare system or whether they would be other members of the community, because this has an impact on the whole community, not just on the child-welfare system. So it's important that we reach out not only to the elected leaders, but to other the leaders in the community, and I think that that will probably be a little slower process than perhaps the minister has envisioned, because I think it is very important that we get this type of overall real engagement in the community.

So I know that there are a number of other people that wish to speak to this particular bill. I

know that we have a lot of interest in our caucus, in this bill. So I would certainly be happy to provide the—or provide my colleagues with an opportunity to speak to this. We know that we have a crisis situation in Child and Family Services here in this problem. We know that the numbers are very high compared to other jurisdictions that have similar types of demographics. The example that's always used is Saskatchewan. I know the minister doesn't particularly care to be compared to Saskatchewan, where they have roughly 4,600 children in care and very, very similar types of demographics to we—to what we have here.

But the reality is, that's what the numbers are, so that would indicate to us that there is certainly problems here that we need to find solutions for. Perhaps this is an approach to deal with the solution, but it's certainly important that we continue to work together with the First Nations and try and find some solutions in regards to this. I'll—with those few comments on record, I would certainly encourage others to speak to this bill.

Mrs. Bonnie Mitchelson (River East): Thank you very much, Madam Acting Speaker, and I rise to put a few comments on the record today on Bill 15, The Child and Family Services Amendment Act, that recognizes customary care of indigenous children. And I did hear the minister indicate, in her responses to the member for River Heights (Mr. Gerrard), that, you know, the focus was on indigenous children, and I can understand that. But I'm just hopeful that when we bring in legislation, we've got legislation that's inclusive of all communities, all parts of Manitoba and all cultures. So, if that homework hasn't been done by the government, I would encourage that those steps be taken, because there isn't any legislation that should focus only on one culture in our province at the exclusion of others.

We have seen a track record of this government as a dismal failure when it comes to supporting children in our child and family services system, and I have some experience with dealing with the child and family services system, having been the minister for six years under the Filmon administration, and not an easy portfolio. And some of the issues that have to be dealt with—and I know you, Madam Acting Speaker, as well as many others on your side of the House have had the opportunity to serve in that position in—under the New Democratic administration, and it isn't easy, and there are many nights that you take issues home with you and can't let them go as a result of some of the horrendous

things that happen to children and families. And very often we can feel quite helpless, and it's important that the right decisions are made for the right reasons to move forward. And I know that we were cautiously optimistic when the devolution legislation came in, hopeful that we would see an improvement in our child and family services system as a result.

*(15:40)

And, Madam Speaker, I have to say that I don't believe that the whole process of devolution was handled appropriately by this government. And even though it took a few years to implement devolution, it wasn't long enough, because what this government did was set those agencies up to fail. They didn't have the opportunity to get their proper training in place and the proper people in place to provide the supports and the services to the most vulnerable children in our society. And we saw some horrible things happen to children as a result. We saw files closed on children and those children transferred to different agencies. We saw a mess within the system. We saw workers—we had workers coming to us behind the scenes and saying, they are rushing this ahead; we are being told to close these files and get them off our plates and get these children moving because they want to move on devolution.

And, Madam Speaker, we saw some horrendous things happen. We saw the terrible instance of Gage Guimond, who was moved out of a caring and loving foster home and reunited with extended family, and we saw him killed as a result under this government's watch. And we had major investigations, and there were internal investigations and there were external investigations done, and there were reports done that talked about how the agencies weren't prepared; they didn't have the proper training in place for their staff to make the appropriate decisions on these very, very vulnerable children. And Gage Guimond was a result of that.

And there were recommendations that were made, and we still today don't know whether all of those recommendations have been implemented. But I will tell you, you know, there's been all kinds of attempts by this government to bring forward what they might call new initiatives: legislation that says the safety of children will be first and foremost, paramount, in any decision that has been made, but we haven't seen that happen. And legislation is only as good as the paper—it isn't as good as the paper it's written on if it's not implemented and followed. And we haven't seen legislation be followed by this

government, and it's a sad state of affairs when we see more and more children come into care as a result of the policies and the processes that have been put into place. And you know, we've had 17 years, 17 years of a government that gives lip service to the whole issue of protecting children and providing the proper supports, and yet we see more and more vulnerable children having to be apprehended and taken away from their families under this government's watch.

And, Madam Speaker, we don't really need legislation to move towards customary care. We've seen, in some instances, where some agencies have taken the initiative on their own to move forward to try to ensure that families are kept together, that they put the supports in place, and there have been some successes. These could be built upon. We don't need to, with great fanfare, bring in legislation at the eleventh hour. All it takes is common sense, some direction, some policy direction by a government that has responsibility for this—these children, and that should have been happening.

But, Madam Speaker, we haven't seen those kinds of things happen. We have seen more and more children fall through the cracks, more and more children that have been apprehended and taken out of their families and put into situations that aren't necessarily in the best interests of those children. And, you know, we've moved away from warehousing children in hotels, but very often children are put into group homes or settings where there isn't the appropriate training provided to the staff that are looking after those children. And we have seen horrific instances where those children have gotten into worse circumstances as a result of being placed somewhere where there aren't the appropriate checks and balances in place.

So, Madam Speaker, I question whether, in fact, this legislation or whether this government would follow through on this legislation or whether they're looking to provide, again, lip service to an issue that's a very serious issue. We have children in our province of Manitoba that need a government that looks to provide the most appropriate support for them and their families, and we continue to see more and more vulnerable children as a result of some of the failures of this government over the last 17 years.

Very little has changed, Madam Speaker, and, you know, the Children's Advocate expressed significant concern—[interjection]—the Children's Advocate has expressed considerable concern and

has made many recommendations to this government over the years involving, you know, recommendations around providing support to children with special needs, providing some support to children that are aging out of care.

I'm dealing with a family in my constituency right now who has a child with severe medical needs that is aging out of the child and family services system, and we can't find—the family can't find the appropriate supports for this child. And there seems to be some conflict between adult services and Child and Family Services and the Department of Health, and there's nobody that can find a solution for this poor child.

And so, Madam Speaker, there's a lot of frustration out there on behalf of those people that have tried to support and look after children with special needs in our community, and they're finding that they can't get the required support for those children. And, you know, a foster family that has looked after and nurtured and cared for a severely medically challenged individual child for 18 years, and then all of a sudden is having to make a decision that they may have to give up that child and that child will not have the support of the only family they've known for 18 years because we have a government that can't get its act together inter-departmentally. And there's fighting and there's disagreement on what that kind of support should be for this 18-year-old child, and when you've got a family in sheer frustration saying, I can't take this anymore, I'm not prepared to continue the fight, we're going to have to let this child go, there's something severely wrong with the system.

And we have those instances and it's not the only one. I deal with families in my community from time to time who—foster families that have had significant issues with their foster children not being prepared to move out of the foster home and back into a natural family that they have never known, they haven't had any connection with for years and years, and the appropriate supports and transition has not been provided and has not been put into place.

*(15:50)

And, Madam Speaker, who suffers? Sure, it's the foster families that may have broken hearts, but who really suffers? It's the child. It's that child that might be ripped out of a loving and caring home and not had the proper opportunity to transition back into family. And I guess that is what customary care is supposed to do, and I would hope that this

government will not again rush into trying to make something happen without the appropriate supports in place that put the vulnerable children that we support through the child and family services system first and foremost. This isn't about the community and reuniting children with the community, and the community taking ownership. This isn't about the foster family that may not want to let go of a child that they've nurtured and cared for for a while. This is about putting that child as a centre and the first focus and ensuring that nobody's power struggle takes precedence over making sure that the right decision is made for the right reason for that child.

So, Madam Speaker, I believe that reuniting and putting supports into a family to try to make that family successful and to make that family work is the right direction to go. I have absolutely no problem with that. But, with the track record of this government and the mess that was made of devolution which should have been a positive process, when I see what happened there, I question whether they have the ability to move forward on this initiative.

So we'll be watching carefully and we'll be looking at what those out in the community say as they come to committee to ensure, Madam Speaker, that we can be satisfied as an opposition party, that we're not going to see the same kind of problems that we saw with devolution when it was introduced, and—not introduced, but implemented, in this province.

So, with those few comments, Madam Speaker, I will let others have an opportunity to speak and put their comments on record.

Mr. Gerrard: Madam Speaker, I want to begin by saying that Manitoba Liberals are supporters of customary care. We view it, this is a healthy direction. But we want it to work for children and families, and ensuring that it works means paying careful attention to the details of how it's implemented, how the funding will work, and a variety of other matters.

There are some questions and some contexts that we need to put these in. As of now, we have been under the current government for 17 years, so we've had 17 years of waiting for the introduction of customary care. And many have wondered why it was not introduced earlier, why it was not a part of devolution many years ago.

In 1989, New Zealand moved to mandate family group conferencing before taking children away from their parents, bringing in a form of customary

care. That was 27 years ago. I've visited with people and have talked with a number of Maori people who were involved, and who talked about what—the change that happened there, and how the change has improved in, but also where some of the problems and the implementation was. We can certainly learn from that experience. It's interesting to note that New Zealand, with a population of about four times that of Manitoba—Manitoba has about 10,000—a little more than that—kids in care, currently. You might expect that New Zealand would have 40,000 kids in care, but they actually have about 4,000. And so they have about one-tenth the number of children in care that we do. I think in part, a reflection of the success of the change that they've made in 1989, but they've been able to do a variety of things, and, interestingly enough, Ma Mawi here in Manitoba has demonstrated that family group conferencing can be very effective in Manitoba. And it, as I have said, is a form of customary care.

The NDP, to some extent, are bringing in a form of New Zealand lite, not going as far as New Zealand went 27 years ago. And we will see how it works, and it is important as we move forward that we move forward well. And that's why it's going to be really important to have at the committee stage a variety of views and experience presented and that those views and experiences are well looked at and listened to and incorporated in some of the ways in which this bill will be implemented and rolled out.

Customary care is a worthwhile goal and, certainly, if it is implemented well and effectively, can improve the care of children in Manitoba. The hope is, and the aim of this bill is, that customary care can be a staple of the operation of Child and Family Services in Manitoba, and this is certainly a good aim. The track record of the present NDP government with regard to their oversight of Child and Family Services in Manitoba has been, put it bluntly, disastrous. There's been a high increase in the number of children in care from approximately 5,000 in 1999 to over 10,000 now. The NDP may change the way they count the numbers, but that's the numbers that are still reflected in the most recent annual report before they changed how they counted.

That number of 10,000 and whether it's a little more or a little less, we don't need to argue about that because that's all the change that would make from counting it differently. But 10,000 is roughly 10 times, as I've said, the number of children in care on a population base in New Zealand, in Australia, in

the US and UK and Sweden. We're an outlier. And we're an outlier in part because of what's happened in the last 17 years. We went from the situation of residential schools where children were apprehended and taken into schools. We went to a situation of the '60s scoop where there were many children who were taken out of their homes and to what will likely become known, Madam Speaker, as the 2000 scoop, in Manitoba under the NDP government.

And it's likely that future governments may well have to offer an apology for what has happened in the last 17 years, just as an apology was offered with regard to residential schools. And it's likely there will be at some point, and has been, indeed, for Manitoba, an apology related to the '60s scoop. The tragic death of Phoenix Sinclair and the subsequent inquiry and, of course, the many, many reports of problems in CFS over the last 17 years and recommendations for improvement, going back, indeed, to the '70s and '80s, speak to the problematic situation.

I remember, for example, some years ago reading the report of Sigurdson and Reid, which was written and released in 1987, and being shocked at how many of the recommendations had not been implemented and how the NDP were, in fact, in many circumstances in the first decade of the NDP government since 1999, taking things away from the direction of the recommendations which were being made by Sigurdson and Reid and neglecting in their first 10 years the support for families and that more children and fewer—instead of fewer children being apprehended and taken away from their families.

It is important, therefore, that as we move to customary care, that we do it well. And it's important that what happened with devolution, that a good concept was poorly implemented, that we don't want that to happen again.

* (16:00)

I want to point out, Madam Speaker, that—and emphasize that there are many, many social workers and others in our child and family services system who are working very hard to help families and children, and they're doing the very, very best that they can, and they need to be praised for those efforts and recognized for those efforts and for the incredible work they are doing and trying to do. It has been made much more difficult under the NDP with the way that they have run the Child and Family Services, and that is sad, but that is essentially what has happened.

Madam Speaker, I have been on more than one occasion, in fact, on several occasions to Nelson House. I want to congratulate and recognize the chief and council under Chief Jerry Primrose, which initially implemented the changes to bring about a child and family services system, which was incorporated within a family and community wellness centre under one executive director and one budget and one building. An effort which included not just Child and Family Services, but counselling supports, public health, a daycare, supports for healthy children, initiative for FASD, putting these together so that there could be many other ways of supporting children, and that this has resulted in much improved support of children and families and many fewer children being taken out of their families, being apprehended.

When I was there, I also noted and talked to one of the social workers who talked about what a remarkable difference it had made when they changed from the old authoritarian style in which the social workers went into the home and said, we're here to take your kids away, no argument is possible, to the situation where they have at the moment, where the social workers can go in with respect and say, you know, we understand that there are some issues, we'd like to work with you to see if we can find some solution.

It is the same approach which is being used in Australia by people, particularly in western Australia, and has been called the Signs of Safety approach in which you look at how you can build on strengths and how you can respect families and treat them with the dignity and the care and the support that is effective in keeping children with families and enables the best possible outcomes.

I look forward as this bill goes to committee stage. It is important we have lots of people coming forward and talking about this so that we can benefit from the advice that we receive from people who have had varied experiences in Manitoba.

I suspect that there will need to be more discussion and more changes to the funding framework with the models of customary care being moving forward. It is the experience in talking with people at Nelson House, at Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation Family and Community Wellness Centre, that it is important to recognize that the funding model which has been used is not as appropriate when what your goal is is to keep families together and to make sure you can do what you can to support families as

well as to keep children safe and healthy and developing and growing optimally.

I think it is noteworthy, for example, that the overall change in Nelson House is not just a change in reduction of the number of children in care, but there's been a 50 per cent reduction in youth crime in the community because they're able to support healthy families, and that is something that would be wonderful if we could see the same sort of change province-wide and no longer be one of the places in Canada with one of the highest crime rates.

There is a big opportunity here to support children and families and to do it well, and I look forward to working with all other MLAs here. I am concerned about some families who may not be able to access the customary care approach and be helped by this. We have had, for example, a family who have been demonstrating outside the Legislature for many months now, and one of their concerns has been that their children are not getting access to their own culture and their own language. And, you know, would they not be able to get customary care? It certainly would appear that they wouldn't fit in this model.

And so I would encourage the minister to have a look and to try and make sure that a family like this family would have the opportunity and that the children and the parents in this family would not have to wait a long time before they would also have this opportunity. They have already waited, I think, about seven years.

This is important enough that it should be there and it should be possible for people throughout the province to have access to this approach and to a better way of doing things.

With these remarks, Madam Speaker, I want to bring my comments to a close. I believe that we need to move this forward. I look forward to it getting to committee and to making some significant changes in the way that Child and Family Services works here in Manitoba.

I want to say thank you, miigwech, ekosi. Let's see what we can do and let's, as we move forward, get as much input as we can from people at the committee stage and elsewhere to make this a success.

Mr. Cameron Friesen (Morden-Winkler): I am pleased today to be able to have the opportunity as well to rise in this Chamber and speak on Bill 15

in recognition of customary care of indigenous children.

And I appreciate the comments that have been put on the record this afternoon by the member for Portage la Prairie (Mr. Wishart), member for River East (Mrs. Mitchelson), the member who spoke just now from River Heights. These are—they are bringing good information to light and asking good questions, and we're hoping that the minister will take into account these additional perspectives that are being offered, questions that are being asked after considerable conversations with other groups, with stakeholder groups. And I know we had this discussion yesterday when we were discussing the First Nations, Metis and Inuit education policy framework. We were talking about the importance of speaking to groups, the importance of collaboration, conversations that are ongoing with groups.

And, indeed, when the member of Portage la Prairie was opening his remarks and posing questions to the minister in that part of the deliberations this afternoon that are now built into our proceedings to allow for questions on a new bill, he asked important questions about the process by which important groups had been engaged in the conversations leading up to this bill. And, certainly, we have heard from any number of these third-party groups that said they weren't at the table meaningfully. They weren't always consulted. I actually believe that there was questions around when the minister actually announced this bill at Thunderbird House, if all the groups who were attending that day actually knew what they were attending to do, whether they knew what the announcement was. Was that bill in their hands that day or was that—was a draft copy? Was—did they have access to the actual content of this legislation? This is what we mean by meaningful dialogue.

Madam Acting Speaker, as previous speakers have made clear, we have a significant problem that seems to be in some respects particular to our province, a problem that is not shared by other jurisdictions to the extent in which we experience it here. And that problem, of course, is that we now have the dubious distinction of having over 10,000 children in the care of Child and Family Services in Manitoba, children under the age of 18. And that number does not include children over 18 in extension of care with CFS. That number is approximately 500. Earlier this afternoon, the member for Portage la Prairie shared that this is not a

number that is shared by the province of Saskatchewan, even though there are so many similarities that we have with that province: similar numbers of indigenous people as a portion of the overall population, similar size of population of the province, similar economies, similar demographics. Certainly, they're not the same, but we need to sit up and take notice as Manitobans when we hear that the number in Saskatchewan of children in care is 4,600.

* (16:10)

Just prior to my speaking, the member for River Heights (Mr. Gerrard) put information onto the record that in New Zealand, a country I believe he said with four times the population of the Canadian population, you might expect that New Zealand would have approximately 40,000 children in the care of their social services, and yet they do not. They have 4,000 children in care, less than one half of our province. That should be an astounding statistic when we hear it. It should be a call, a clarion call to action. It should be that we are taking extraordinary measures, emergency measures, to make this right.

And so, certainly, I want to begin my comments by making a similar observation as I made yesterday when we were debating Bill 13. And this comment would be that this bill, this initiative, this action by government, could have been undertaken sooner. We have 17 bills previous to today on the Order Paper. Now, with the bills that were put onto the Order Paper early on in the afternoon, I would count that we have over 20 bills on the Order Paper. I could estimate that we have 11 days of debate possibly left here. We may have as many as 14 or 15. We know what the rules say about the window of opportunity the Premier (Mr. Selinger) has to call an election. We basically have expiring seconds on the clock. And the government is attempting to throw a free throw from the centre line.

And, Madam Acting Speaker, it discourages me. The timing of this action—the minister can say that this is a priority for her, but this could have been the minister's priority three years ago. And I get it; some of this has to be seen on this chronological line, on this linear line, where we have been, the conversations that we've been having as a nation, as a province, the work that was done with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the recommendations coming out of that action. I understand that. I've followed these proceedings as well. I'm sure that all members in this House have.

I would suggest, though, to the honourable members in this House that we would not have had to wait for any recommendation from that commission to get started on this important work. I would submit, as well, that there is no recommendation, no single recommendation out of that important body of work that will summarily respond to the situation that we have in Manitoba at this time. We have this title of having the highest number of kids in care in Manitoba, and while others have made this point, I'll make just a few—I'll reinforce a few of the comments that have been made this afternoon.

Indigenous children in Manitoba account for 26 per cent of all children. Indigenous children account for 90 per cent of the children in care. And, while less than 2 per cent of non-indigenous children in Manitoba have contact with CFS before the age of 15, indigenous children have more than—22 per cent have contact with the system. That's one in five First Nations children that will be in contact with CFS before their 15th birthday. And we know that all demographic and population studies, StatsCan, statistics Manitoba, all corroborate that the indigenous population is the fastest growing cultural population demographic in Manitoba.

So I referenced the—this body of work, I referenced reports that had been issued, but this is all why First Nations leaders gathered last fall and released a report called *Bringing Our Children Home*, and it calls for greater resources within First Nations communities so that children aren't removed from families in the first place. Basically, we can choose, as a society, we can choose as legislators, we can choose as those who have been entrusted with these things, to deal with these problems after the fact or to address them head on and marshal resources early on to see if we can get at these trends and reverse things.

And in so doing, yes, the size of this challenge is great. But this goes to what I spoke about yesterday—and I believe you were in the chair at that time, Madam Deputy Speaker—about looking at those models where we do see success. And we have seen success even in this province. Even in the face of all of this challenge, we are seeing success right now in First Nations communities driven by those stakeholders, driven by those community leaders. We're seeing that, as the member for Portage La Prairie (Mr. Wishart) said this afternoon in Nelson House, we're seeing a pilot project there. I'm not sure whether the elders and the chief and council and other community stakeholders would refer to it that

way, so apologies if they're not calling it a pilot project. It is a project that is implemented and seeing results and is being expanded. I'm a little bit aware of the project but not to the extent that I probably should be.

But I've heard—I remember travelling with colleagues in the North last year when a number of us went up for a—about at this time of year to a trip to Thompson and surrounding areas. And we heard there was some excitement from officials out there about the success that was being had in a model that is different in some respects than the one being suggested by the minister for CFS this afternoon, a model that, in contrast to this—I should say, in fidelity to this one, does seek to make sure that there is cultural appropriateness that is recognized and that is of value when there is a difficulty in a home, when we know that the situation has become the case where action needs to be taken. But, in that community, the action being taken is to remove the offending adult or adults from the context of that home.

And the indicators, those indicators, those metrics that we measure as a society, in Nelson House are exciting to look at. High school attendance is up. We see youth crime and recidivism dropping. These are good measures; it means we're moving in the right direction. And I wonder why this afternoon we did not hear the minister for CFS get up and say, and I'm taking notice, and this has become one major area of strength and knowledge that we are leaning on heavily as the department. I didn't hear that. I didn't hear that from her today.

Certainly, as policy-makers, as legislators, shouldn't we be reflexively looking at models that work and saying this is where we're going to put our efforts, this is where we're going to put our resources? Now we're going to enable those people who have had success in that jurisdiction to be able to take that message and to take that methodology and put it in place in other places. This should be the way we proceed, from success to success to success. I didn't hear that fundamental commitment this afternoon, and it discourages me. It's like we're having half a conversation.

In principle, these are good ideals that we're speaking about this afternoon, absolutely: cultural appropriateness for all children. Now, of course, the member for River Heights (Mr. Gerrard) as well raised some good questions about why we're isolating indigenous communities and saying this is

good for them, but we don't see a value in applying this to others. And he raised some very good points, and I know that the member for Portage La Prairie (Mr. Wishart) has raised these same points when it comes to—I mean, I think about the Somalian family that I pass almost every morning and say good morning to on the front stairs of the Legislature who had their children seized years ago. Those children are in care. To what extent are cultural considerations being made as these children are in care? What assurances have that family been given that there will be an appropriateness there?

I'm thinking about the children that were seized by CFS going back about two years ago in that area of western Manitoba; I think the community is Westbourne. It's a—actually, it's an older order Mennonite community. That's what it is; it's not a Hutterite community. It's an older order. And, certainly, I'm not going to speculate about charges that were made and charges that were assessed in that area; I'm not the expert there. But children were seized, and I wonder about the level of cultural appropriateness that was made for those children who were placed, overnight, taken from their homes. And I bring this up because people in that community—people who were never accused of crimes in that community—were talking about these same issues. They were talking about the cultural appropriateness that was being made.

* (16:20)

Now, these people don't live as we live. These people choose to live in a very simplistic way. It's a faith community. It's a traditional community. It's probably a very paternalistic community in its construct; I'm not judging. They don't use electricity. They don't use modern transportation the way we use—they don't have access to modern media the way we do.

So were those children, when they were seized, were they allowed to watch television and use smart devices and things like that? Now, what I'm saying is that these things get thorny. Ethically, they get thorny. What accommodations were made for those children? And if they weren't made, then how difficult does the reconstruction of that familial unit become when those children are returned to that community and they have seen so much and they have done so much? Is it for us as a society to say, well, we think that they should be exposed to those things? Now, if we take that view, then it informs our discussion of this as well.

I know that I am talking in the abstract, and I know I'm talking about some bigger, ideological matters, but it matters. These foundations matter here, and here's what I would get at, and I'm going to say this with a little bit of trepidation because I hope it comes out right, and that is we are making assumptions in the case of this bill, and one of the fundamental assumptions we are making in this bill is that we need to proceed in respect of the number of children in care in First Nations, in Metis, in Inuit communities in a manner that is fundamentally different, fundamentally different than how we proceed with any other child who comes into the system.

See, I agree with the idea of cultural appropriateness. I think it's important. If we've learned any lessons from the residential school system, if we're learning any lessons now, if we're heeding the recommendations arising from the reports issued just recently by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, it will be that societies have no right to uproot children and then to somehow transplant ideals of who they should be onto them. We, as a society, are hearing from so many people who talk to us about how damaging this is, not just to themselves, but how damaging to generation after generation this is.

So I'm hoping that as a society we're getting there, but then we take a bill like this and we proceed in the direction of doing something similar. We proceed in the direction of saying—and we heard the minister say this afternoon she has no plans to make this model work for other distinct groups or other subsets of our population, like the Somalian family that every day comes here, stands on the front steps of the Legislature and talks about cultural appropriateness for their children who are in care after seven and eight years. I think about that Westbourne—I believe it is Westbourne—community in the west of Manitoba, and whether we were, as a society, making sure that those children in care—what a shock to them if those accommodations were not made. I say this with just a little bit of knowledge. I did hear third-party reports that that was not always the case where those children were placed, and I think about the difficulty of them coming back to the community and the hardship that that will cause.

So I think that we've got a challenge right from the outset, that we seem to be somehow proceeding in the direction that says our approaches need to be wholesale different, and from that assumption then my questions arise, as I know the member for

Portage la Prairie (Mr. Wishart) had questions that had arisen, and these questions are valid, and the questions need answering because what we seem to have is a framework document. It's an idea, there's some principles expressed, and these principles are good. But from there, there doesn't seem to be enough content, and so what's happening is that good questions are arising.

When the minister speaks in the bill—and I'm just going to turn to it here—the minister speaks about her ability to designate indigenous communities, and I think this must be perplexing to groups like AMC and, well, and southern chiefs in my area of the province, MKO. So many of these third-party groups, I don't imagine that they would have seen language like this on a draft bill and not have had significant questions about what this might mean for ministerial powers. And I wonder if those conversations were part of her deliberations. She said she had ongoing talks. But did they know what they were signing up for?

And I think about this, and I wonder whether the minister's definition of indigenous communities will be greater than just First Nations and those communities. Could she seek to designate areas of the city of Winnipeg and the city of Portage la Prairie, areas of the city of Winkler and the city of Brandon, rural areas, villages, communities, as indigenous populations? And on what basis would she do so? And perhaps it is a good thing for her to do. I'm not sure. We need to think about the vast number of children who are coming from reserve from First Nations communities and into urban areas. So this is an important consideration.

I think about the questions that were raised today when it comes to how this arrangement would differ from formal foster care. The minister tells us it's—oh, it's very different. It's very different because 64 communities will be involved. Well, that was a strange response for her to give. It does not proceed that because 64 communities are involved, that it's fundamentally different. Now, I don't question that she's saying it's different. What concerns me more is that there seems to be no kind of framework understanding of what it will mean to ensure that there will be consistency between any of these 64 communities. What will—what resources and programs and supports and services be marshalled in community X, and how will that differ from what's decided in community Y? We could see such a dramatic range of ideas of how to proceed. It needs to be housed; it needs to be somehow co-ordinated.

It reminds me in one respect—maybe this is a poor comparison. I apologize if it is. But one of the first bills that directly affected me and my constituency after I was elected was a bill brought by the MIT minister, and it was a good bill in principle, a bill that would reduce speed zones in school zones—in school areas. I remember at the time seeing at the committee stage various groups coming and saying, you know, you really have to provide some guidance to communities, or you're going to get a patchwork of solutions that will have no consistency. And we heard that from expert after expert. And even though at the heart of it, the bill was good; it had tremendous merit; I supported it. I support now measures that will keep kids safe on their way to and from school, speed limit changes are a part of that. And I'm sure that our pages even would know, attending their high schools, they've probably seen those signs in place that say, you know, 30 kilometres per hour.

But the fact is we did get a patchwork. We got a great deal of difference in the way communities saw that mandate given to them to go out and get this done. We could have benefited as a province to have more consistency. Certainly, when you look at speed limit changes, you see that consistency in places like Saskatchewan or North Dakota, Minnesota, Wisconsin. I go through those jurisdictions, the signs are the same from community to community, and I know, I can predict and I have a certain confidence.

Perhaps it's a strange analogy to make, but I would say in this case, too, it is so much more important when it comes to this issue to get it right. Framework agreement, what resources, what services, what support. What is an indigenous community; what is not an indigenous community? Why does the minister get to decide? Will there be a panel she has of experts to help her determine? What will be the composition of that panel? These are the substantive measures that she will tell you, we'll do this in regulation. I say, no, this should be subject to debate. This should be open. This should be transparent. This should be measurable.

*(16:30)

And, speaking of measurable, Madam Acting Speaker, why in this bill do we not get any kind of indication of measurement? How will we do this? On what timeline will we set out to accomplish what we are doing? What will indicate success? What will be the measurements? What will be the rubric, to borrow a term from my former profession? What will be the outcomes? What are the objectives? In

principal, we know what that objective is: Keep kids safe. However, it gets a little more complicated because the minister has said customary means care provided to an indigenous child in a way that recognizes and reflects the unique customs of the child's indigenous community.

That's a workable definition. I bring that definition up because fundamentally as a society, we have a responsibility to get this right and to keep kids safe. The absolute value, the thing of paramount importance is to keep kids safe, to make kids safe. My question for the minister would be: What happens if these agenda items do not align? Who are those interest groups wielding the most power at the table when it comes to—could we conceive of a situation where keep kids safe and keep kids here do not align? And how, then, do we as legislators go at trying to make sure that that is never the case, No. 1, and No. 2, if it is ever the case, that the safeguards will all swing in the direction of keeping the child safe? These are the fundamental questions that come up.

The minister speaks of community leaders. Who are they? Which ones? Which ones are on the in, which ones are on the out? It is imperative that these decisions are making—made in such a way that it does not become a partisan issue. These things should be so far away from issues and considerations of partisanship. We need oxygen in the room. We need to have the windows open and let the breeze go through on this one. This needs to be done with hands open. It needs to be done in a manner that ultimate reflects what our most basic obligations are. We have got to get these numbers down of children in care.

I know, Madam Deputy Speaker, you used to run this department and from what I hear, you were a powerful advocate and a good decision maker, and you are a team player and you got things done, and I think you did a good job, and you were given a tough assignment, as ministers are given. There's so many areas in this province; we have tough assignments, and we have a responsibility and we try to get things done. When it comes to this issue, it's so important to get it done the right way, and this bill leaves many questions unanswered.

The fact of the matter is, even today, while the minister brings this bill, in recent memory, just in the papers, weeks ago, this same minister was trying to change the way she reports the number of children in care. Why? She didn't like the numbers. Why? They

were about to rise past 11,000. Why? There's an election coming up; it wouldn't look good to report that there's 11,000 kids in care instead of 10,000 kids in care. So what does the minister do? She tries to change the metrics. She tries to change how those kids are counted. She makes the assertion, well, Saskatchewan doesn't count kids who are voluntary placement. Our critic called Saskatchewan; they do count them. So her thesis is denied.

Minister of Finance (Mr. Dewar) does the same thing when he didn't like numbers and what they might suggest about his ability to actually reach the targets for deficit reduction. So what does he do? A year ago, in congress with the Premier (Mr. Selinger), they changed the way that financial reports are issued in this province. They say, well, we're going to concentrate on core government expenditures instead of summary government expenditures. And this will be great for everyone, except that you only have to go back about seven years when that Premier was the Finance minister, and he said summary reporting is the most transparent. He said that. Complete flip-flop now. Why? Didn't like what the numbers were suggesting. When this government doesn't like what the data is driving at, they change the data. And that is not the way to proceed.

So, Madam Deputy Speaker, the few minutes that are remaining to me, I just want to stress that there's a number of issues that this bill brings up. I think about the way customary care is defined in here. I'm thinking about the necessity to keep kids safe. I like the Nelson House model that keeps kids in homes. It recognizes in principle the need to create stability in the life of a child. It recognizes the extent to which a placement in social services rips a child away and it comes with huge cost. My colleague from Portage la Prairie talked about now that becoming a generational issue and how we haven't gotten this right. I like the model of Nelson House because it keeps kids in communities.

Now, of course, we can't just kick out an offender. What we do then is we marshal those resources, exactly as my colleague from Portage la Prairie said, to get people the help that they require, whether those be addictions counselling, family life counselling, other forms of supports. You establish mentorship models. These—none of this is new. None of this is new to you. You've seen the research. You've tried to implement these things as well. But we need to look at models that succeed.

So, Madam Deputy Speaker, I know that colleagues are interested in putting other comments on the record. I thank you for the opportunity to put these brief comments on the record as well. I cannot stress enough: It's important with respect to this bill that we get it right.

Introduction of Guests

Madam Deputy Speaker: Before recognizing the next speaker, I just want to welcome to the Chamber the former MLA for Portage la Prairie, David Faurshou, who joins us—who did join us in the loge. Has he left? Is he still there? Well, he was here, and we welcome him for when he was here.

* * *

Mrs. Myrna Driedger (Charleswood): I appreciate the opportunity to put a few words on the record on this legislation, and it is indeed something important that we are talking about here, but it is something important that we should have been talking about quite some time ago. I understand that we are the last of the western provinces in Canada to be looking at customary care. Whatever it's called in other provinces, the premise is the same. But it's troublesome that we are just having this discussion at the—on the eve of an election. This is a discussion that we should've had some time ago.

The comments put on the record by my colleague from Morden-Winkler are indeed legitimate concerns that have been raised about this particular bill, not the concept so much but how the NDP are choosing to go about implementing this concept. And my colleague has certainly raised a lot of concerns.

My colleague from Portage la Prairie also has spent a lot of time looking at this issue. This is something that is, you know, an area that we have all had some concern about with the issue of vulnerable kids. It is a topic that has taken a lot of, you know, a lot of time in question period and in Estimates in terms of asking the government about their failures in this area. It is a challenging portfolio. There's absolutely no doubt about that. No matter which party is in government, it is not a portfolio that is an easy one to manage. There are a lot of challenges in it, and because we deal a lot with children and vulnerable children in it, it's certainly something that we can appreciate the work that goes on by a minister or by the department.

But also the cautions have been put forward, too, that we have to get it right, and that's why I think it's

important that, you know, this legislation be looked at very closely. I certainly—I've been talking to an expert out there, and the expert is closely involved with working with Aboriginal communities, and this expert is very aware of what other provinces have done, and she does not feel that what the NDP in Manitoba are doing with this legislation is the way to get it right.

* (16:40)

She's certainly supportive of customary care but with her level of knowledge, I certainly—she certainly caught my attention with some of the alarms that she was bringing forward about this particular legislation, the grave concerns that she was expressing to me about it and, you know, indicating that the government does not have it right with this bill.

As it's pointed out too, that the current state of The Child and Family Services Act in Manitoba would already allow customary care to be implemented. So it does raise the question, if we can already do it, the government could have done it. They could have done it any number of years ago. They could have followed what Alberta, British Columbia and Saskatchewan have been doing and looking at with this. But yet, here we are, less than two months from an election, and all of a sudden, the government wants to bring forward legislation that, you know, raises the question, then why didn't they do it before, and why does it have to be done with new legislation if the ability is already there to implement this? Well, it's obvious why the government would want to do that. It's also obvious that what they're trying to do is make it look like they are moving on something now on the eve of an election but they're not telling people that they could have done it before and they could do it without this legislation.

The last number of years, listening to these stories about children that have fallen through the cracks and children that have died has been a very, very difficult, you know, scenarios to listen to. And to see the pictures, you know, in the paper all the time, when you open a paper and you see that beautiful little Phoenix Sinclair's face staring out at you. It's just horrible to have to think what a lot of children have gone through and the horrors that some of those children have gone through. And this government has had 17 years to address it.

When we get reports from the Children's Advocate, damning reports that point to failures by

this government, failures to address the complex needs of child and family service, the government has had warning after warning; they've had report after report. And yet, you know, the most recent report from the Children's Advocate shows abject failure by this government. And one of the comments certainly points out that there is a chronic state of emergency that continues to remain in Child and Family Services. If that's the case, why wouldn't the government have acted sooner? Why wouldn't a minister have acted sooner? Why did this government drag its heels on something when so many children have died in care, so many children have gone through horror stories in care? And people have been talking for years about a broken child-welfare system.

I came out of an organization, at the time was called Child Find, and in Child Find, our motto was every child has the right to be safe. And that was something we worked very hard towards addressing through our organization. And we did hear a lot of stories. It was heartbreaking. I am so proud of where that agency has gone in its development towards becoming the, you know, centre for—the Canadian Centre for Child Protection. It's so important in terms of what they are doing. And it is so important that we continue all to strive towards ensuring that all children are safe and feel safe. And there are so many kids in our child-welfare system that do not feel safe, and they aren't safe.

The issues that have been raised over a number of years have certainly given the government a lot of opportunity to do something. Having this discussion, I think, is a good discussion, because customary care seems to be something that has an opportunity to work, has the ability to work. But it certainly needs to have a much more fulsome look at it and a much more fulsome discussion in terms of what it might actually look like in Manitoba. There seem to be a lot of questions being raised about the way the government has structured it. There are certainly a lot of unanswered questions, and it becomes much more obvious as we talk to more people that the government may not have gotten it right. And, despite the comments and the language that they use from time to time as we want to get it right, it doesn't appear that they got this one right. And it's important that we can't continue to have failures like this because it is children, it is babies that are the ones that are falling through the cracks.

So with customary care, and as my colleague from Morden-Winkler pointed out, you know, we

have to learn from residential schools. We have to learn a better way of doing things. We cannot any longer move forward and continue to make mistakes because the ones that are paying the price are the most vulnerable. So while this customary care certainly seems to have some really good parts to it, and maintaining that cultural connection to your, you know, to your culture, having that connection with your family, we still need to, I think, make sure that we do get this right.

Mr. Speaker in the Chair

Now, I know what the government is certainly looking at doing. They are hoping that this bill is going to alter public perception of their failures and, you know, hopefully they are thinking that it would make a few ripples in a very bloated, inefficient and dangerous child-welfare system, but I think it's going to be obvious to a lot of people too that they have left this too long, and that is becoming the major question to this legislation. While there is merit in the idea of looking at customary care, it's something that this government has grossly mismanaged in terms of trying to implement it now. It is something that was desperately needed much before today, much before the eve of an election. And I think there is good merit to continuing to look at this, but as it is put together, we have to ensure that the results that we want to achieve out of this is going to be results for kids in care.

And, Mr. Speaker, I will end my comments now. I know there are some others that want to speak also, but I know that as a government in Manitoba—whosever in government—there has to be a better way of managing the child-welfare system. We owe it to all these little kids to do a better job, and we are certainly committed that we would work very hard to make sure that kids indeed do feel safe in this province.

So, thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker: Is there any further debate on this matter?

Mr. Shannon Martin (Morris): Oh, Mr. Speaker. Thank you very much. I always appreciate the opportunity to rise and obviously participate in—*[interjection]* Well, that too. Run to rise and participate in the exercise of democracy that we have here in the Manitoba Legislature.

Obviously, the bill before us, Mr. Speaker, is one that speaks to—and I believe the word used by the Child Advocate was a crisis, a crisis that we have in

this province when it comes to Child and Family Services, and the 10,000, almost 11,000 children that we find—that Child and Family Services has in custody.

And I note, Mr. Speaker, that today the Minister of Family Services (Ms. Irvin-Ross) got up in the House and talked about—with great gusto and pride about how those numbers are trending down, but she failed to note the large asterisk to her answer in that the reason any of those numbers may be trending down is that the NDP have made the decision to change the math in how they're actually counting for the children because, apparently, some children that are in care will no longer be counted as in care.

* (16:50)

So, you know, it's always interesting that if these members opposite had spent as much time trying to actually resolve the issues and work on these issues as they do trying to manipulate the statistics around these issues and to make them look more palatable to the public, then perhaps we wouldn't have these issues.

Now of course, I'm not going to—I'm not in any way trying to gloss over, Mr. Speaker, obviously, the generational issues that face all of us as a nation and as a province when it comes to the issue of care of First Nations children. This is an issue that is not new and it is not an issue that has only recently begun, and there's many comments, too, obviously about the intergenerational damage that has been wrought on First Nations children as a result of, obviously, of residential schools, of the '60s scoop and that. But, as I was at the mayor—Mayor Bowman's State of the City Address this afternoon, and at his racism summit earlier this year with my colleague, the member for Arthur-Virden (Mr. Piwniuk), the City of Winnipeg has declared 2016 as the Year of Reconciliation, and I know this is something that I think all of us as elected officials and all of us as Manitobans play a role in is how would I, as an individual, what can I do to help work towards that ultimate goal.

Now, obviously as part of that goal, this bill, Bill 15, the Recognition of Customary Care of Indigenous Children, forms part of that goal, and obviously the bill is a clear and fundamental rejection of what had previously occurred some years ago in terms of the '60s scoop, and that is that now we are going to obviously allow for indigenous children to maintain their cultural ties with their community because if we're not—if we—not only are

you removing a child from their family, and obviously the work done by Child and Family Services workers on a daily basis is not the kind of work that any individual can do. Obviously it is incredibly stressful and difficult work and I can't imagine the toll that it takes on them as individuals, both physically, mentally, and spiritually to have to see and deal with the kind of situations that they see and deal with on a daily basis.

But, obviously, so, not only are we taking children to ensure their safety, Mr. Speaker, but we are ultimately, regardless of the circumstances, we are removing children from their family and the only family they know, even if those family units are broken. And I know when I grew up in the Westman area in Brandon, Manitoba, I had the good fortune to work for Community and Youth Correctional Services as a probation officer for three years and so I had—and as well, as I was a youth respite worker at an open custody home in which young men who were being released out of Agassiz detention facility in Portage la Prairie—this was part of their transition home and so I would often take them out into the community as part of that, and my interactions with them and my observations are no different than what we see within Child and Family Services, in that being that the majority of these individuals were of First Nations descent, which again speaks a lot to the issues that are being addressed within this legislation.

But, that being said, Mr. Speaker, despite the circumstances that they may have come from and the poverty they may have come from, the family situations which may have even included violence, in more cases than not, these young men still had a desire to return home, to return home to those very families. So, as going back to Child and Family Services, as we remove these children from their home, I think it's important, and I think this is what this bill is trying to do, obviously, is to ensure that there still is that connection with culture. Culture is—and sense of identity because, ultimately, that is the fundamental basis of any individual.

And, as we've seen through the failings of our own federal policies, Mr. Speaker, not just within Canada but around the world as cultures clash, and we have seen federal governments interact with indigenous populations in North America and South America and Australia and so forth; we've seen the legacy of the failure of how those have been addressed. And I believe the phrase used back 100-plus years ago was that the goal of the

residential schools was to get the Indian out of the child.

Now, obviously, here, Mr. Speaker, what we want to do and what we've come to recognize is obviously that the value of children, of all children, and in this case indigenous children, of the value of maintaining their community, heritage and values so that they continue to feel that sense of pride in whether it's being Cree or Ojibway, Metis, from whatever background, cultural—First Nation that they find themselves in. And so the goal, obviously, is to meet the unique needs of each family.

And that's really what it needs to be about because we can't take a one-size-fits-all approach with children. I mean, many members in this House have children. I have three children, and each one of the three are very, very unique. So, obviously, the goal of the legislation in trying to maintain that family union, Mr. Speaker, whether it's with the biological parents, in the extended family, elders or community members. I mean, that kind of customary care providers, this is the idea of that collaborative approach that we as elected officials need to promote within Child and Family Services. And it is ultimately a goal that I think is going to prove of long-term value.

And I think that's part of what we need to look at, Mr. Speaker, is that we need to take that long-term approach because, again, the issues being faced by indigenous families are, again, are not the results of policies that have brought—been brought in over the last several months. These are brought in by policies that were probably first introduced 200-plus years ago. So any kind of expectations that they're going to be quickly resolved should be put aside because, in fact, that kind of mindset is only going to lead to the ultimate failure of initiatives like the recognition of customary care of indigenous children.

But even that being said, Mr. Speaker, the idea that this will take time, that there will be an effort to meet the culture and identity needs of indigenous children that are removed from the family home, I think it's worth noting that here we are on February 24th with a provincial election due to be called probably in the next three weeks. So it's always interesting that we find ourselves with a significant piece of legislation, a bill of a number of pages that obviously seeks to be transformative when it comes to Child and Family Services and how it deals with First Nations children.

And yet, again, here on the—literally the dying days of the NDP government, we find ourselves putting forward a piece of legislation that they really could have and should have brought forward some time ago. But I think, once again, I think this just shows that this government is more interested in headlines than hard work, Mr. Speaker, and whether it's this file or the Finance file, whether it's health care, these are all well documented.

The current state of family services is clearly a state of crisis. Almost 11,000 children into care—*[interjection]* Oh, sorry.

Mr. Speaker: Any further debate on this matter?

Is the House ready for the question?

Some Honourable Members: Question.

Mr. Speaker: Question before the House is second reading of Bill 15, The Child and Family Services Amendment Act (Recognition of Customary Care of Indigenous Children).

Is it the pleasure of the House to adopt the motion? *[Agreed]*

The hour being 5 p.m., this House is adjourned and stands adjourned until 1:30 p.m. next Monday.

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF MANITOBA

Thursday, February 25, 2016

CONTENTS

ROUTINE PROCEEDINGS		First Street Bridge Project	
Introduction of Bills		Helwer; Ashton	610
Bill 18–The Path to Reconciliation Act		Helwer; Caldwell	610
Robinson	599	Petitions	
Bill 202–The Employment Standards Code		Applied Behavioural Analysis Services	
Amendment Act (Sick Notes)		Briese	611
Gaudreau	599	Community-Based Brain Injury Services	
Bill 203–The Results-Based Budgeting Act		and Supports	
Stefanson	599	Mitchelson	611
Bill 204–The Cyberbullying Prevention Act		Martin	613
Ewasko	599	Manitoba Interlake–Request to Repair and	
Bill 205–The Seniors' Rights and Elder		Reopen Provincial Roads 415 and 416	
Abuse Protection Act		Pedersen	612
Graydon	600	Provincial Trunk Highway 206 and Cedar	
Bill 206–The Workers Compensation		Avenue in Oakbank–Pedestrian Safety	
Amendment Act (Employer Advisers)		Schuler	612
Smook	600	Interlake Emergency Room Staffing	
Members' Statements		Eichler	612
La Loche Community		Budget 2016	
Lathlin	600	Driedger	613
Children's Special Allowance		Piwniuk	614
Wishart	601	Minnesota-Manitoba Transmission Line	
Madeline Schultz		Route–Information Request	
Braun	601	Smook	614
Bipole III Line–Landowner Concerns		Beausejour District Hospital–Weekend and	
Pedersen	601	Holiday Physician Availability	
West End Safe Space		Ewasko	615
Swan	602	ORDERS OF THE DAY	
Oral Questions		<i>(Continued)</i>	
OCN First Nation		GOVERNMENT BUSINESS	
Pallister; Chomiak	602, 604	Second Readings	
Pallister; Robinson	603	Bill 15–The Child and Family Services	
Elections Manitoba Investigation		Amendment Act (Recognition of Customary	
Goertzen; Chomiak	605, 606	Care of Indigenous Children)	
Goertzen; Robinson	606	Irvin-Ross	616
CFS First Nations Agencies		Wishart	618
Wishart; Irvin-Ross	607	Gerrard	620
Department Funding		Mitchelson	624
Gerrard; Dewar	608, 609	Friesen	628
Gerrard; Nevakshonoff	609	Driedger	634
Elections Funding		Martin	635
Altemeyer; Blady	610		

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