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4TH SESSION, 37TH PARLIAMENT

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MONDAY, NOVEMBER 17, 2003

The House met at 10:04 a.m.

[J. Weisbeck in the chair.]

Prayers.

[1005]

Private Members' Statements

SMART CARE

R. Hawes: When you turn on the TV or pick up the newspaper and you read anything or hear anything about health care in this province, it's almost always about acute care. Whether it be operating theatre waitlists or emergency rooms or hospitals in general, that's generally what you read about. Very little is said about preventative care. In fact, probably one of the least talked about parts of health care in the media is preventative care. Yet preventative care is going on in this province, and it's going on in a very large way and often very quietly.

Preventative care is what's practised by almost every family practitioner in this province as a major part of their practices. All family practitioners are involved in hospitals and in acute care, but many of them are involved very actively in preventative care. There are small initiatives being undertaken in almost every corner of this province by family practitioners and sometimes by specialists that are quite frequently without a lot of recognition or fanfare and often with no remuneration to the doctor that's taking on or designing the initiative.

I want to talk about a couple of those today, both in my riding, but I know there are so many others around the province that go without recognition and are run by doctors who are deeply, deeply caring and are interested in one thing. That's improving outcomes for their patients and doing it by keeping them healthy rather than treating them once they enter the acute care system.

Preventative care. The first one is an initiative undertaken by Dr. Frank Ervin, a respirologist in Maple Ridge, in conjunction with Dr. Jeremy Road, a professor at UBC. This initiative is called smart care. It is in place in other parts of the world, particularly Alberta and Quebec, where there have been great successes. It's to treat what's called COPD, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease. That's basically shortness of breath. The symptoms are shortness of breath during normal activity, daily coughing and sputum, reduced lung function and poor airflow.

COPD is caused by smoking. It's tremendously, tremendously on the increase in this province and, in fact, in the country. In Canada there are about half a million people that have COPD, and I have a number of statistics here. The mortality rate in 1995 was 17.3 out of 100,000 people. That's a very significant mortality rate. In 1994, 13 percent of all hospitalizations were

caused by COPD. In 2001 it was the fifth leading cause of death in this country.

COPD reduces patients' quality of life. It dramatically increases their use of the acute health care system, so Dr. Ervin is working hard in the community of Maple Ridge to try to do something about COPD. His approach, first and foremost, is that this is a preventable disease — completely preventable. Stop smoking.

One of the methods that he uses to demonstrate to his patients, particularly kids, who want to start smoking is to take a drinking straw and breathe through it. Breathe through it for about ten minutes. If that doesn't really show you what it would be like to live with COPD, then do a little bit of exercise while breathing through that straw. I can tell you, according to Dr. Ervin, that is exactly what it's like to live with COPD. I tried that, and it's incredibly uncomfortable. If that isn't a message for anyone who thinks they want to embark on a smoking career, they ought to really try breathing through a straw for a while to see what may well happen to them.

The bottom line is that if you are susceptible to getting COPD, you can be tested, and that susceptibility can be determined early through what's called a spirometry test. Dr. Ervin is trying to entice family doctors, actually throughout the whole province, to invest in spirometers that can test lung function and will be able to tell smokers at an early time whether or not they're susceptible to COPD.

[1010]

In 1996 it cost about \$4.3 billion to treat COPD nationally, and it is approaching an epidemic. It is the only leading cause of death that is increasing in prevalence. If you think about that, that's pretty severe.

It is certainly preventable. Dr. Ervin is working to reduce emergency room visits, to increase quality of life through early diagnosis with the use of spirometry, to introduce exercise programs for those who have early signs of COPD — and there are some new drugs that are effective in treating COPD or reducing hospitalizations — and to stop smoking. That's the biggest thing of all.

In Mission there is another program run by a family physician, which looks at lifestyle after a cardiac event. What it does is recognize that after a cardiac event, people go through a psychological change for some period of time and that they need to have a change in lifestyle. They need counselling to change their lifestyle and to learn what caused the event and to learn how to live with the aftermath of the event. Often these people are given advice at a time when they're not ready to take advice because of the psychological change that the trauma from the cardiac event has caused.

Recognizing this, this physician has brought in an ex-nurse, a nurse that is no longer practising, and is using her as a counsellor. They're building a counselling program for cardiac patients at no cost to the health system. He's basically paying out of his pocket to try to make sure that his patients get the right kind of advice and that they get some repeated counselling so they can understand what has happened to them,

how to deal with it and how to get on with a lifestyle change that often will include exercise, stopping smoking, diet — all kinds of things that cardiac patients are advised to do but, unfortunately, advised when they are least able to receive the information because of the psychological change.

I've asked the Minister of Health to respond, and then I have some wrap-up comments.

Deputy Speaker: Replying to the member's statements, the Minister of Health Services.

Hon. C. Hansen: I appreciate very much the remarks of the member, because I think it's an area that, really, we must celebrate more. If you look around the province, the work of doctors in every community coming up with new and innovative ways of making sure that the needs of their patients can be met.... It reminds me that between 1985 and the year 2000, we actually saw a reduction of 50 percent in the number of acute care bed-days, and it's because of new ways of treating patients — as the member mentioned, keeping patients out of acute care hospital through preventative means but also things like laparoscopic surgery, for example, which allows more procedures to be done as day surgery rather than having to admit patients for days at a time for a particular procedure.

The member mentioned COPD, which is a significant problem and a growing problem. It's interesting that B.C. has the lowest percentage of smokers of any province in Canada, and that percentage is going down every single year. I think it points to some of the successes of our anti-smoking programs in this province. But the thing that's interesting is that even though the number of smokers in this province declines, the number of individuals suffering from diseases resulting from smoking is going to continue to increase in the years to come. That's COPD, but it's also illnesses such as lung cancer, for example. They are going to continue to grow as we go forward.

We have recently done a study in the ministry — or that we assisted with — looking at individuals with multiple chronic conditions. We identified that there are about 126,000 British Columbians, or about 5 percent of the adult population of British Columbia, who are the big consumers of acute care in this province. They actually use 60 percent of our acute care bed-days in the province. They utilize 30 percent of our health care budget, and they constitute about 30 percent of doctors' visits. What we're looking at is how we can bring a preventative approach to keep those individuals out of our acute care hospital by utilizing the kind of programs that the member has developed.

[1015]

We are developing a range of chronic disease management initiatives to make sure that family physicians at the community level can provide the kind of support that is needed to those individuals. It's also a big part of the primary care initiatives that we're rolling out, and we will be working with doctors in these commu-

nities to explore new ways of meeting the needs of their patients from community to community.

Certainly, I've had some personal experience. My wife has asthma, for example, which is an illness that, if it's properly managed, can be done with really minimal doctor visits but also with little if no reliance on the acute care health system. We still see that visits to emergency rooms by people with asthma are far too high, because those visits are preventable if those conditions are properly managed ahead of time through a preventative approach such as the member was talking about.

The other thing is around personal lifestyle and accountability. I've put out what I call the 3 percent challenge — that every British Columbian should be devoting 3 percent of their waking day to doing something for their own personal well-being. Perhaps it's walking or running or some other form of exercise, but also around things like stretching and just making sure that you maintain a healthy lifestyle.

If every British Columbian was to put aside that 3 percent, it would make a big difference over time in our health care costs in the province, and 3 percent isn't a lot of one's day. It actually works out to an average of about 30 minutes a day. I think it's an investment that every one of us as British Columbians should be making to achieve the kind of objectives the member is talking about.

R. Hawes: Thanks to the Health minister for that.

In 1991 — Grey Cup Sunday, 1991 — I was on the ice coaching some kids, and I had what I thought was some pretty bad indigestion. It seemed to get worse through the hockey practice. By the time it was over, it had dawned on me that I hadn't really had anything to eat that day. I'd had half a dozen cups of coffee and smoked about a dozen cigarettes, and I wondered what could cause indigestion.

Obviously, it wasn't indigestion. It was the onset of a heart attack that, lucky for me, was aborted through the use of some drugs when I got to the hospital fairly quickly. I had angioplasty, which without any damage to my heart.... Luckily, the system worked very well. But it taught me something. One, no more cigarettes. That was a hard way to learn not to smoke, but for 12 years I've been off that vice. It also taught me that after a cardiac event, when you come face to face with your own mortality, there is a psychological change that takes place. You're not ready to get counselling or anything else early.

The right approach needs to be taken with cardiac patients, so applaud the efforts of my constituent doctors in both Maple Ridge and Mission for the initiatives they're taking. The Health minister is absolutely correct that we have to get people to be accountable for their lifestyles, but through this whole piece — and the one thing I do want to emphasize — the family physician is so critical in this whole exercise of preventative care. They are working hard on their own volition. They are the true heroes of health care — family physicians — because they are undertaking initiatives that improve

outcomes and improve quality of life for patients, often with no recognition.

I would urge the Minister of Health to look at some form of a portal where some of these very innovative ideas that are going on in communities all over this province can be fed in somewhere, examined to find out if they have broader application and then put into use across the province. I believe the family docs that are doing these kinds of things and the specialists that are involved in these kinds of programs deserve a lot of recognition for what they do. They are not the people who are running drop-in clinics and who don't take part in hospital time spent with the community, nor do they take part — the drop-in guys — in some of these other types of initiatives.

The family docs spend hours and hours of their time, often with no compensation, to build programs because they care so very deeply not just about their patients but about health care in general. Their whole interest and their whole lives frequently are devoted to improving outcomes in our health care system. I want to laud the family physicians in this province, and I am pleased to have had the opportunity to mention their value.

Deputy Speaker: The title of our second private member's statement is "Education and the Economy," and it's presented by the member for Burnaby North.

[1020]

EDUCATION AND THE ECONOMY

R. Lee: Today I bring to your attention the important issues surrounding the underlying technology structure that affects all of us in our communities, our economy and our education system. This structure is called the Internet. This network of unseen fibre optic cables and equipment provides Internet accessibility for all of us at home and at work. Internet connectivity is necessary for enabling communications, creating business efficiencies, promoting education, facilitating research and distributing information.

Multiple networks exist today, some interlinking and others not. These networks have been developed and are being managed by several different groups around the province. There is BCNET's optical regional advanced network, ORAN; the provincial government's SPAN-BC, the provincial learning network and a few others that provide their users with Internet access.

Today I'm not going to talk about the Internet you use at home. Rather, I will be speaking about the high-speed networks that benefit our academic and research institutions, our health facilities, our government offices and our businesses. The three main areas that benefit from high-speed advanced networks are our local communities, businesses, and education and research institutions. Advanced networks are not necessarily the solution for the digital divide in our communities but, rather, can give some clues on how the problem can be addressed.

An example of this is the case of Prince George, the community I had the opportunity to visit last week. Prince George is connected to BCNET's optical regional advanced network, which is the province's high-speed research and education network. The BCNET network has allowed cutting-edge networking to be available in northern B.C., creating greater connectivity for the community up north. UNBC, the Prince George library, the northern health authorities and other interested local public sector participants will be or have been connected to BCNET's ORAN with speeds up to two gigabits per second.

Prior to the ORAN in northern B.C., there was just a ten-megabit-per-second link to UNBC with no high-speed research and education network available. Now with the ORAN, there's world-class networking to the north available to the public sector community.

While this may not be the solution for all communities in British Columbia, it does provide some insight into solving some of the problems associated with the digital-divide issue through increased accessibility and improved connectivity for communities.

Another lesson that can be learned from the example of BCNET's ORAN is the fact that the network also connects PLN's university colleges. This enables PLN university colleges to gain access to BCNET's high-speed research and education network. That connects academics and researchers in the province and also connects to the Canadian national CA*net 4 high-speed network managed by CANARIE.

The second area benefiting from advanced networks is local businesses. We have been seeing, through the explosion of the Internet among Canadians and globally, that e-business is an important way in which businesses can reach clients and vendors worldwide. It also helps businesses create efficiencies through the use of technology and helps to attract new clients.

Having advanced networks is an attractive business investment incentive that keeps B.C., and particularly Burnaby, competitive in the technology arena. Competition and a healthy investment climate for technology companies are what attract investors like eBay to relocate their call centre in Burnaby. The city and the province are also able to attract and maintain other technology-related businesses and opportunities in this area, such as BCIT; SFU; AI, the Art Institute of Vancouver in Burnaby; Discovery Parks; IBM's innovation centre; the Telus headquarters; and other companies, educational institutions and research facilities, all with an eye towards advanced networks and furthering their working technologies.

[1025]

These businesses are not only thriving from Burnaby's focus on advanced networks and technologies but are also creating an attractive environment for new clients into the market and for stimulating the technology sector in Burnaby and in B.C. as a whole.

Other businesses that are benefiting from Burnaby's high level of connectivity include local startup companies and small businesses. Urban Networks is a local

Burnaby company that's beginning to make a name for itself in the fibre optic cabling business. This is the company that has laid the fibre optic cable for most of BCNET's ORAN. The company has created a business model where it leases strands of fibre to companies and communities that have an interest in high-speed networks. This business model can be used to bring broadband to local communities.

The third area to benefit from advanced networks is the provincial research and education community. The ORAN has been developed and is currently being managed by BCNET, a non-profit consortium of the universities that connects to the national research and education network, CA*net 4. The ORAN provides speeds and bandwidths that are unsurpassed, delivering service 3,000 times faster than the high-speed Internet that we receive at home with ADSL or cable. This means that our research facilities and education institutions can collaborate with their colleagues worldwide, share applications and their work on line, increase communications, distribute information faster and more effectively, participate in video conferencing and share computer resources across large geographical distances. The possibilities are endless, and academics and researchers find new and exciting ways to exploit the networking technologies that are available to them.

I'm awaiting comments from the member for Vancouver-Burrard.

L. Mayencourt: I appreciate the member's comments regarding one of my favourite subjects, the building of advanced networks throughout British Columbia. I'm aware of BCNET and its history in bringing advanced networks to British Columbia, and I know that BCNET was the first regional network in Canada when it was established in 1998. BCNET is an important part of a network infrastructure that extends throughout British Columbia. It shares many similarities with the provincial government network, SPAN-BC, and they are both high-capacity enterprises that carry mission-critical information for very demanding clients. There is, in fact, a very good working relationship between these new networks.

I am also appreciative of the role played by BCNET in advancing research in our province. They support the Advanced Network Conference, which is an annual event that brings individuals and organizations from around North America to discuss how networks can be used to develop new applications in advanced research. I understand that the theme for this year's conference is going to be grid computing. That's where you link thousands of PCs in a chain to form something like a supercomputer. These computers can be geographically quite separate. A measure of their utility is the quality of the network that connects these computers together.

Another project that BCNET is involved in is the NEPTUNE project that was launched recently in Victoria. "Launched" might be the right word for it, because this project will create the world's largest cable-linked

sea floor observatory and may revolutionize ocean science. The observatory will consist of an underwater network covering the entire Juan de Fuca tectonic plate, an area of 200,000 square kilometres off the earthquake-prone coast of British Columbia, Washington State and Oregon.

I would like to update the member's information regarding access to the provincial infrastructure for telecommunications. I understand that with the creation of Land and Water B.C., which has responsibility for this area, they have considerably streamlined the process and made it a lot simpler to access provincial rights-of-way and infrastructure. People in the heartlands are loving that because networks are hugely important to British Columbians' lives through information technology.

[1030]

Our government made a commitment to bridge the digital divide that exists in many communities that have no access to high-speed Internet. Bringing high-speed Internet access to all British Columbia communities will ensure that B.C. residents have access to business opportunities and the potential that connectivity provides. Access to high-speed Internet provides extraordinary new avenues for electronic health service delivery and enriched educational opportunities for students. It gives small businesses in smaller communities a fair chance to compete in a global marketplace and to participate in a knowledge-based economy.

Not bridging the digital divide is not an option. To close the gap, our government is developing dynamic and effective agreements and partnerships. In fact, the Premier's Technology Council recommendations would indicate that we will combine government's annual purchase of telecommunications services with that of other public sector organizations. We will tie the procurement of these aggregated telecommunications services to the provision of broadband in rural and remote communities, something we heard a lot when we were touring with the Finance and Government Services Committee. Because of that, we can offer a cost-effective solution to bring better access to digital services in B.C. communities.

We've worked extensively with many stakeholders, including government data networks, extended public sector entities, telecommunications vendors, communities and other levels of government. We've also been working with the federal government to leverage funding. We're making excellent progress. For example, last June the Minister of Management Services announced four technology projects that bridge the digital divide in several heartlands communities. The province is supporting upgraded high-speed Internet technology to school district 20, the Nisga'a government, the city of Kamloops and the village of Tahsis. Access to the Internet will be greatly enhanced, and high-quality, interactive video conferencing capabilities will be available in all locations except for Tahsis.

Government has developed unique and flexible agreements to provide for high-speed access, helping community-based networks provide innovative solu-

tions by working closely with expertise in the private sector. Recently the Minister of Education announced that several new school districts are participating in an e-learning project that will allow rural students to access, through the Internet, programs and resources they might normally not have.

Together with the Ministry of Management Services, the Ministry of Education is developing a plan to upgrade school Internet access. The ministries are identifying schools and priorities to ensure that heartlands students and educators can access state-of-the-art electronic learning tools. In addition, the Ministry of Management Services is providing technical assistance and expertise to B.C. communities applying for broadband for rural and northern development program funding. I am told that the minister expects to make a significant announcement in this regard in the next few weeks. I, like all members of the House, look forward to those comments from the minister.

R. Lee: I would like to thank the hon. member for Vancouver-Burrard for his comments. This is indeed a very exciting time for all of us in the province, because we have the technological resources to use advanced networks that are available to us to help us achieve greater access and a competitive edge in networking technology and further health, education and scientific research initiated in this province.

However, none of this can be achieved alone. We must foster and support the existing structures so that we can continue to build on what we have already established. We also need to explore new uses and new ways to expand existing networking structures and find ways where it can be effectively interconnected.

After looking into the problems facing a local utility company and a local networking company, I understand there are two primary issues that need immediate attention: municipal access agreements, MAAs, and the cost of using provincial infrastructures. Utility companies would like to work more closely with their public and private sector partners but are hindered by MAA costs and regulations.

Another area where cost is prohibiting business is in the area of trying to utilize provincial infrastructure for telecommunications and networking purposes. The amount of money needed to use provincial infrastructure for networking cabling stunts the capacity and growth of private and public sector activities. Therefore, there needs to be an improved policy put in place that encourages usage of these ducts at reasonable rates. Perhaps adopting policies that are akin to Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission, CRTC, rates is a viable option. In any case, this is a second area that should be researched and examined very carefully so that all rates are competitive and fair.

[1035]

I raise these two issues so that we can all work together to foster technology and the advanced networks sector in my riding and for B.C. as a whole. I have heard directly from representatives of this sector that

these two issues need attention if we are to lend a cooperative hand in developing Burnaby and B.C. into an innovation centre. I will be keeping a close eye on developments in this sector to ensure that progress is being made and that issues such as these are addressed and studied very carefully.

POWELL RIVER — A CANADIAN CULTURAL GEM

H. Long: It's my pleasure to stand here today and talk about arts and culture in Powell River and the Sunshine Coast. Powell River is a gem. It is a gem and a Canadian culture gem. Recently it won the cultural capital of Canada award for municipalities under 50,000 people. Even before that, the people of Powell River and the Sunshine Coast knew they were living in a very special place. Situated along the magnificent coastline of Malaspina Strait, the Powell River region is home to some of the most spectacular natural beauty in the world. Rich first nations history and creative residents are clearly visible in local shops and in many area parks. Festivals and activities will keep you entertained throughout the year, including Kathaumixw music festival and the week-long annual Blackberry Festival.

In 2004 a special treat — Qathet. Qathet is a Coast Salish word meaning "together in concert." It is a very fitting title for this celebration. Thanks to a \$250,000 matching grant that comes from being named the cultural capital of Canada, the festival will be truly amazing. Qathet will feature a month-long showcase entitled Culture by the Sea to celebrate the municipality's fiftieth year of presenting new works in film and visual arts, theatre, music and dance. Culture by the Sea will feature the Sliammon first nation, the French Canadian community and the Powell River regional community model.

Qathet will also feature the sixtieth anniversary of the Festival of the Performing Arts; the fiftieth-anniversary concert of the Powell River Chorus; the twentieth anniversary of the Festival of the International Choral Kathaumixw; a Canadian French-English summer immersion school; the establishment of Powell River as a summer home for the Victoria Symphony Orchestra; the creation of a new position for a composer-in-residence who will write a work for orchestra, choir and dance based on the Coast Salish legends; the production of a book documenting the history and the evolution of arts in Powell River; and the development of a fully integrated business and marketing plan which will serve as a master cultural community plan.

Part of that plan is now complete and highlights some of Powell River's strengths: the offering of a quality of life, the gateway to the natural beauty of the region, world-class and natural sports and adventure recreational amenities, a rich fabric of arts and culture and the Sliammon first nation.

The report also includes business models which detail plans for the following events that will be brought to life thanks to Qathet — the Symphony Or-

chestra Academy of the Pacific, the Victoria Symphony Orchestra residency, the Opera Academy of the Pacific and the Rain Coast Academy of Lutherie. The latter is an educational facility where professional and hobbyist luthiers — people who make and repair stringed instruments — can learn and upgrade their skills through practical experience.

The overall impact of the four business models is \$5.6 million over five years. One of the lasting legacies of Qathet will be the Canadian international orchestra school. The Symphony Orchestra Academy of the Pacific is the first of its kind in Canada and has already attracted a full slate of international instructors, and the Victoria Symphony Orchestra will make its summer home in Powell River as the orchestra-in-residence. Selected musicians from all over the world will converge in Powell River to learn more under music director Arthur Arnold.

[1040]

All in all, Qathet will cost about \$800,000 to put on, but the economic benefits will continue for many years to come. The national spotlight will be shining on Powell River and the Sunshine Coast in 2004, thanks to the recent cultural capital of Canada award, but I am pleased to say that this is a community that has quietly become a model for arts and cultural tourism in the province. This is a community that spends \$36 per capita on arts and culture, and its money is well spent. There are so many things to do in Powell River. In fact, the Powell River visitor information centre has a list of 101 things to do. In Sechelt there is an internationally renowned Festival of the Written Arts and the Sunshine Coast country music festival. There's the Gibsons Jazz Festival and the Pender Harbour Jazz Festival. The Sunshine Coast classical music festival is also a big draw.

The Gibsons Landing Fibre Arts Festival is also worth mentioning. This is where fibres from the local pulp mill are turned around and made into art. This is a self-sustaining commercial arts cultural tourism venture that has drawn participants from across Canada and the U.S. for the last five years. To me it is amazing to take fibre from a mill and use it to create a new enterprise that helps promote long-term economic growth.

There are theatre groups, dance troupes, a large number of musicians playing all types of music, potters, sculptors, painters and many other artisans. The Sunshine Coast is a haven for artists and crafters, many of whom are regionally and internationally known.

The province, the country and the world are starting to take notice of Powell River and the Sunshine Coast. A case in point: a film about the Sliammon first nation will have its world premiere at the prestigious film festival in New York City on December 7 of this year. *Kla Ah Men: As Far Back as the Story Goes* will be screened at the 2003 Native American Film and Video Festival in the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian. The film was selected from among more than 345 works that were submitted.

Cultural jobs are the fastest-growing area of job creation in Canada. This growing industry is driving

Powell River's revitalization, and with the Olympics fast approaching, I can't help but be excited.

It's going to be a great 2004 in this beautiful seaside community, and I hope to encourage everyone to make the trip to learn firsthand why Powell River is a Canadian cultural gem. There are no words to capture the beauty you will see when you get there. You can only see it with your eyes. I truly hope this award, this recognition, will bring more sets of eyes to this community that is more than worthy of your attention.

I look forward to the comments from the Minister of State for Community Charter.

Hon. T. Nebbeling: Let me first of all say to the member for Powell River-Sunshine Coast how appropriate it is to highlight the cultural and other values that these communities on the Sunshine Coast represent. I have been to Powell River a number of times. When I was there recently, I met with the mayor. The member was present. We discussed how Powell River is constantly looking for opportunities not only to enrich the quality of life for its citizens but also to really create job opportunities and attention from the world to that area. Of course, with the recent announcement of being named cultural capital of Canada, this is just a tremendous opportunity for Powell River to showcase itself not just to British Columbians, not just to Canadians but also to the visitors that come to our province.

[1045]

One of the really exciting things that I think will make Powell River a prime example of a community that finds its special place in the communities that attract our visitors is the partnership between the community itself and the Sliammon first nation. That partnership is a foundation to create programs and forms of exposure, which is certainly for the visitors coming to this province a very important reason for coming to British Columbia. When visitors come over here and learn about the rich heritage of an aboriginal community, their cultural aspects and their cultural traditions, it is something that visitors really love to learn about and take back home when they go home to their respective countries. Seeing this partnership in Powell River having developed into something very concrete, something very positive, is something that again will, in my mind, entice many visitors to British Columbia to actually go over to the Sunshine Coast, go over to Powell River and experience the very unique place.

As you know, Mr. Speaker, we will have the 2010 Olympic Games. With that, we have, as a province, the opportunity to showcase what British Columbia is really made up of. We can show our mountains. We can show our rivers, our creeks, our lakes. We can also show how we as people together enhance our quality of life through the use of culture. That is, again, where Powell River, in my opinion, will be a leading community.

The community is committed to the enrichment of their culture and their heritage. It's one of the few communities I know that is actually putting its money where its mouth is. Per capita, \$36 a year is spent. That

is very unique and, again, should be a shining example for other communities to pursue that type of additional enrichment of community values as well.

I'm truly excited to have heard the member highlighting this aspect of the riding that he represents. He has spoken and certainly focused on Powell River, but we should also remember that it's the whole Sunshine Coast that is driven by arts and culture. There are so many activities during the summer months in particular that entice the people who are aware of these programs to come to the Sunshine Coast. Powell River now putting more emphasis on the cultural activities in that area will be a catalyst for further visits.

Just one point the member mentioned that I wasn't aware of. What community can say they have a sixtieth anniversary of a festival of performing arts? Sixty years. That's an incredible achievement. Powell River Chorus — the 50-year anniversary. What community has a chorus that has been there for 50 years? These are just two examples of how that community truly has been working with culture. I compliment and congratulate the member for having brought this to the House so that more British Columbians and visitors will hear about this gem on the Sunshine Coast.

H. Long: Well, I really want to thank the minister for his kind remarks. I know he really believes in our community. He was there recently with me.

In my closing remarks I'd like to thank the minister again. I just want to finish up by saying that, believe it or not, the best is yet to come for Powell River and the Sunshine Coast in terms of arts and culture. I am happy to say that the master carvers from Sliammon first nation have started carving 20-foot totem poles which, when finished, will grace the Powell River Seawalk in the future. For quite some time this area has been a cultural gem. It's just now that people are starting to notice it.

With Qathet next year and the Olympics in 2010, Powell River and the entire Sunshine Coast are about to be discovered by the world. Lovers of the arts and all things cultural will be delighted when they visit the lower Sunshine Coast. Events like the renowned Festival of the Written Arts, the Fibre Arts Festival and Hackett Park Craft Fair attract thousands of visitors each year, and that number will only increase in the years to come.

In closing, I would like to read a vision statement from the Powell River Regional Economic Development Society: "The Good Life by the Sea, Powell River, B.C." Don't take my word for it. Visit Powell River and the Sunshine Coast and see for yourself. I want to thank everybody.

[1050]

PRIVATE UNIVERSITIES

H. Bloy: Today I'd like to talk about some of the exciting things that are taking place in our province and in my constituency with respect to post-secondary education. During this session in the House, we've

heard a lot about measuring success. To do that, I say we need to look no further than the Ministry of Advanced Education. I've had to make a few notes on this, because I get so excited about the work that's being done in that ministry, and I want to stay on track and on time.

In the past two years it has become perfectly clear that students across the province are finally discovering real education and employment opportunities, thanks to the incredible work that's taking place in that ministry. What is success? Well, I'll tell you, Mr. Speaker. Success is when thousands of students embarked on a post-secondary education this fall, because for the first time in a decade they finally had the luxury of real educational choices available to them right here in British Columbia. British Columbians can be proud that we have the leadership of a minister who is taking steps to ensure that students have access to post-secondary education, which they rightly deserve.

Also, I'm sure you recall that this was not always the case. The legacy of the previous government is a sad one indeed. For much of the last decade, post-secondary students have found themselves trapped in a vicious web of waiting lists, overcrowding and limited opportunities. During the NDP's reign of error, many of our brightest minds left this province in search of opportunities elsewhere. That's a shame for British Columbia, because those are people who stood to contribute a tremendous amount to our people, our industries and our society.

The NDP's tuition freeze crippled our post-secondary institutions. By robbing universities and colleges of the freedom to set tuition rates, the previous government left many of our post-secondary schools cash poor and unable to remain competitive in this world. To think that in just two short years, this government has managed to create hundreds of new student spaces.... Well, I find that absolutely mind-boggling, especially when you consider the sorry state this province was left in by the NDP.

Numbers are hard to argue with. Hundreds of new student spaces have been added so far, and hundreds are coming over the next two years — plus hundreds, if not thousands, of new private university student spaces that will be coming available in the near future. Among the public education seats that will be coming available are 825 seats in computer sciences and electrical engineering and 1,800 seats in nursing. The ministry also made a commitment to double the number of medical graduates in this province. That is outstanding news for British Columbia, because all of these future surgeons and doctors are going to be establishing their roots right here in British Columbia instead of taking their skills somewhere else.

There have been many success stories out of the Ministry of Advanced Education, and they are the real success story of British Columbia right now. The ministry has introduced Bill 52, Private Career Training Institutions Act. The government is taking steps to ensure that consumer protection and consumer confi-

dence at our private post-secondary colleges are there for everyone.

Bill 52 is going to go a long way to address the problems created by the NDP, and I am proud to say that it's about time we have a minister who's not afraid to stand up for B.C. students. Under this bill, students will have swifter, easier access to refunds in the wake of a possible school closure.

[1055]

Point of Order

J. Kwan: Mr. Speaker, I know members are used to breaking rules in this House. However, members should know that statements from members, private members' statements, are not supposed to be partisan. This member has been extremely partisan in his language, and I take offence at his breaking of the rules with private members' statements.

Deputy Speaker: Thank you, member, for your point of order.

I just want to caution the member for Burquitlam that these statements can be politically charged, but to be very cautious in some of his statements.

Debate Continued

H. Bloy: My constituency is home to many private post-secondary institutions, one of them being the Pacific Vocational College Ltd. At PVC, I had the pleasure of announcing that the piping trades apprentices will be able to learn their skills at their own pace, thanks to this ministry's initiatives. In most cases, industrial trades schools require students to commit to fixed course schedules, which may not be suited to their learning needs. Thanks to this ministry's good foresight, students in dozens of industrial trade colleges across the province will be able to perfect the skills they need and to spend more time working on specific skills where they need assistance.

Anything we can do to help people get the education they require to enter the workforce is a positive step in the right direction. By helping our private post-secondaries produce more highly skilled individuals here at home, we're actually ensuring that the local employment market is filled with the best possible talent. Having a strong talent pool so close to home is going to do wonders for our economy.

I would like to thank the ministry for putting B.C. students first. I'm going to ask the member for Okanagan-Vernon to respond to this, and then I would like to talk about the Degree Authorization Act, the Degree Quality Assessment Board and thousands of university spaces that will be created in British Columbia.

T. Christensen: Thank you to the member for Burquitlam for his comments and for asking me to respond.

I do welcome the opportunity to talk about private training in the province. Certainly, the member for Burquitlam has been a strong advocate for all types of post-secondary education and often speaks with pride about Simon Fraser University, which is in his riding, but he also obviously has a number of private training institutions there as well.

[Mr. Speaker in the chair.]

We have a broad and diversified range of post-secondary educational institutions throughout the province. Certainly, we have very many high-quality, publicly funded universities, university colleges, colleges, institutes and certificate programs, and all of those institutions are working hard to grow capacity. We also have private universities, private colleges and private training programs that complement and expand on the range of post-secondary educational opportunities available to British Columbians looking to further their education. They offer a range of programs, whether those are academic, technical or skill- or job-specific.

In fact, we have a significant number of private trainers in the province that play an important but very often overlooked role in post-secondary education. They provide a further avenue of choice beyond the public post-secondary system, and they provide top-quality course offerings for students around the province. In this day and age, given that broad range of programs in combination between the public and the private post-secondary institutions, I often think that were you a student graduating from high school these days, it would be very difficult to figure out what you wanted to do next because there's such a broad range of choices available.

While many of us can probably name the publicly funded post-secondary institutions in our own hometowns, we would likely be surprised at the number of private trainers working in our communities, often-times providing the only opportunity to pursue certain types of training in our communities.

The most prominent example in my own constituency is the Okanagan Valley College of Massage Therapy, which has a 13,500-square-foot facility in downtown Vernon, just across the street from my own constituency office. This college provides an opportunity to develop professional massage therapy skills at an international level. It is a Canadian leader in the training of professional massage therapists, providing British Columbia students with an opportunity to pursue certification in this important health care profession.

The Okanagan Valley College of Massage Therapy is one of at least seven private colleges or training institutes providing educational opportunities in Vernon alone. All of them are important to the broader post-secondary education mix in British Columbia. It is a fact that private post-secondary institutions have existed for decades in B.C., quietly providing quality educational experiences for students.

[1100]

In the past they have often focused on providing training opportunities that were not otherwise avail-

able in British Columbia through traditional universities or other publicly funded institutions. Often that training has been for a specific occupation.

Historically, they've shown a capacity to evolve quickly to fulfil a training need when publicly funded institutions have not had the flexibility to do so. They've also proven an ability to add important student spaces in training that is also available at public institutions but that are often oversubscribed. Perhaps the best example is in training for some health care workers such as residential care aides. I certainly know that in my part of the province, that has been a challenge.

The Premier has made it clear that education is a priority for this government. The Minister of Advanced Education has made significant progress over the last two years in increasing access, increasing research, developing an expanded trades training model and strategically investing the taxpayers' money in areas that will provide the greatest return to society. The member for Burrquiltam has commented on some of the investments in terms of expanding the number of health professionals for training, but we've also expanded access to computer science, engineering and aerospace.

The progress being made is part of the government's overall focus on encouraging and accommodating individual British Columbians' will to succeed and to build a province that again leads the country. This focus is embodied in the Achieve B.C. strategy announced by the Premier last summer. It is a strategy that encompasses early childhood education and development, a public education system that offers choice and opportunity and that encourages achievement for all students, and post-secondary education opportunities that enable British Columbians to meet their individual goals. It encourages lifelong learning and ensures that as our children grow up and think about where they want to achieve their future success, their first choice is British Columbia.

Private post-secondary institutions have a role to play in this strategy, a role complementary to that of publicly funded institutions in ensuring that the broadest range of opportunities is available for British Columbians. The Minister of Advanced Education has made impressive progress in creating the framework within which private institutions can fulfil that important role.

H. Bloy: I'd like to thank the member for Okanagan-Vernon for his remarks, and I really want to acknowledge what he had to say. There are three distinct points. We do have a great public education system in British Columbia. I want to acknowledge that because of this ministry, we now have choice for students in British Columbia, and that the Premier supports education as the number one priority in the province.

I would like to talk about private university spaces. More student spaces will be available by next September. With the granting of the new Degree Authoriza-

tion Act and the Degree Quality Assessment Board now in place, thousands and thousands of spaces should be developed over the next many years. Private colleges that have operated in British Columbia for many years, like Kingston College or Coquitlam College, will now have the opportunity to offer university degrees. Private universities from other provinces in Canada, like Lansbridge University of New Brunswick, will now have the opportunity to provide educational choices to students in British Columbia and from around the world. These new universities will now be able to offer B.C. degrees. Also, existing universities like Phoenix University will now be able to offer degrees from British Columbia.

Every new student space that will be created by private universities will be created with private dollars. Every new student seat that is created in British Columbia will be of economic benefit to the province. While providing the highest standards of education, these new institutions will be governed by the Degree Quality Assessment Board, assuring all students in British Columbia of receiving the highest standards of education. I would like to close by thanking the minister for her commitment to providing the best choices to students in British Columbia and the best educational system.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. members, that concludes members' statements for this morning.

[1105]

Hon. G. Abbott: I call second reading of Bill M203.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. members, pursuant to standing orders, unanimous consent of the House is required to proceed with this motion without disturbing the priorities of motions preceding it on the order paper.

Leave granted.

Second Reading of Bills

BRITISH COLUMBIA RAILWAY ASSET PROTECTION ACT, 2003

J. MacPhail: I rise to debate a piece of legislation, a private member's bill introduced by me last spring. The bill is called the British Columbia Railway Asset Protection Act, 2003. It's very brief but very succinct. I'll read it into the record:

"Preamble

Whereas the government has initiated a process to sell the British Columbia Railway;

Whereas, despite the government's misrepresentations, British Columbia Railway is a profitable business; and,

Whereas the people of British Columbia do not believe that government owned assets should be sold off to pay for this government's record deficits and failed economic policies;

THEREFORE HER MAJESTY, by and with the advice and consent of the Legislative Assembly of the Province of British Columbia, enacts as follows:

1 Section 20 of the British Columbia Railway Act [RSBC 1996] Chapter 36 is repealed and replaced with the following:

20 Neither the government nor the company may lease or sell any part of the lines and property of the company.

Commencement

2 This Act comes into force upon Royal Assent."

There we have it, Mr. Speaker. It's very succinct — nothing complicated. Nothing can be misunderstood, and there's every opportunity now for those Liberal MLAs who represent the communities served by the British Columbia Railway — by BCR, as we know it — to vote in favour of this piece of legislation and actually, for once, to stand up for their communities.

I do rise, though, in what some might call a fight against inevitability. This bill is our last chance to listen to the thousands upon thousands of British Columbians calling for the government to abandon its intentions to sell off B.C. Rail, a publicly owned company that is a profitable company and an incredible part of our heritage.

On Friday it was reported in the *Vancouver Sun* — and as far as I'm concerned, the *Vancouver Sun* is often the paper of record for this government.... We were told the cabinet has already made up its mind. Now, the government is not confirming, directly anyway, the *Vancouver Sun* story, but it sure seemed to me they were getting the story from some pretty reliable sources — perhaps even out of the Premier's office itself, as I understand it. Anyway, I assert that this cabinet, under Gordon Campbell, has already made up its mind. In a desperate attempt to cover for their failed economic plan, they are going to sell off B.C. Rail, and they're going to sell it to CN, a corporation that has donated over \$100,000 to the Liberal coffers — the B.C. Liberal coffers — since 1996.

Of course, this decision has been made despite the new-era promise not to sell any part of B.C. Rail. They didn't equivocate in the election. They didn't stand up with the member for Prince George North and say: "Yeah, we're going to sell off all of B.C. Rail except for the railbed and" — I don't know; what is it called? — "the tracks." No. They didn't equivocate at all. The Premier went and said: "B.C. Rail is not for sale."

I thought the now Premier was doing that because he had learned his lesson from his disaster of the 1996 election. In 1996 the now Premier, running as the Liberal leader, said then, "Oh, we are going to sell B.C. Rail," and the communities along B.C. Rail — in fact all throughout northern B.C. — went nuts, as did the people of the lower mainland.

We thought he'd learned his lesson, but apparently the Premier is willing to make the same mistake twice. Now, what is that the definition of — when you keep repeating the same mistakes and hope for a different outcome? Some people define that as insanity. I think it may just be stupidity.

Well, apparently we also now know that the promises in the *New Era* document are worthless. The Liberals have bungled the economy, and now they need to

sacrifice B.C. Rail to pay for their mistakes. This government is desperate to privatize something, desperate to get cash to cover for their reckless tax cut. Why else, except for that desperation, would they sell out communities and break a fundamental election promise?

[1110]

I don't see any of the good Liberals rising up and taking their Premier to court, saying he lied. I don't see that. They were certainly championing others to take previous governments to court about a suspected lie, which proved not to be a lie at all. I don't see one Liberal taking the government to court now, saying they lied in the last election.

D. Jarvis: How about the fudge-it budget?

J. MacPhail: The Liberals failed to privatize the Coquihalla.

Well, actually, the member for North Vancouver-Seymour says: "What about the fudge-it budget?" Actually, a bunch of Liberal front people did take that government to court saying they lied during the election, and the court said there was no lie. The court said there was no lie whatsoever.

Where are the same people? Where's that same guy — the Liberal front man who ran for the nomination? Where's he taking this government to court, saying they lied about selling off B.C. Rail? I wonder whether he's been silenced or whether it was just election mischievous behaviour by this government so that they could get into power and actually tell real lies. That's exactly what's happened.

The Liberals failed to privatize the Coquihalla, which ended up costing taxpayers millions of dollars. They failed to privatize B.C. liquor stores. Now they're trying to make up for that by doing a behind-the-scenes giveaway to all those small business people who invested so much in the privatization of liquor stores. But they're having to do it behind the scenes, after getting egg on their faces.

Do you know why they failed, Mr. Speaker? Because the public does not believe in the same ideological hard line that they do. The public knows it is wrong to sell off our assets to private companies just to make a quick buck. The public does not want this.

Unfortunately, the Liberals have been backed into a corner by their big corporate donors. "Privatize or else," they're saying. I can just see those cabinet meetings now, those private little luncheons that this government has with its big donors. I can just see them wagging their fingers and saying, "You'd better privatize B.C. Rail. You've failed at everything else. Privatize or else. Sell off something or else," and our northern communities will pay the price.

Maybe it isn't too late. Right here, right now the opposition is giving every Liberal MLA a chance to stop this misguided sell-off. They were forced to listen to their constituents on the Coquihalla. They should listen to them now.

Interjections.

Mr. Speaker: Order, please. The Leader of the Opposition has the floor.

J. MacPhail: From North Vancouver to Lillooet to Prince George, people are saying no. This is the chance for the Liberal MLAs to do the same: use their supposed free vote and stand up for their constituents.

On November 5, I tabled a petition that was signed by over 32,000 British Columbians. It was entitled "Stop the Sale of B.C. Rail." The petitioners noted that B.C. Rail is a profitable business vital to the future economic prosperity of resource-dependent communities. In fact, one prominent business person from Prince George, who had signed this petition, wrote: "A lie is a lie is a lie."

Surely the MLAs from Prince George must be listening — 32,000 people. Their constituents are outraged. This is the chance they have to publicly stand up for their community and truly represent their wishes.

However, I predict this. I predict that they'll be whipped to vote down this bill and follow the ideological commands of the Premier. But maybe there is a chance; maybe there is a slight chance. Maybe they spent the weekend listening. Maybe they got a chance to listen to something other than the minister's ever-changing message box.

[1115]

Boy, that Minister of Transportation. Can she switch on a dime? Is she fleet-footed and dancing on the head of a pin? For months now the Minister of Transportation has changed her script so many times, I actually think it's a reality show. There is no script that she's not capable of absorbing at a moment's notice. No one really knows for sure why this government is so determined to sell off B.C. Rail and sell out the communities. What we do know is that pretty much every day the Minister of Transportation gets up and is handed a new message box as her own one of the previous day is torn to shreds by logic and the facts.

I heard one of the Liberal members saying: "Did the previous government ever consider selling B.C. Rail?" Well, as good business people, the previous government examined the profitability of every Crown corporation...

Interjections.

Mr. Speaker: Order, please. Order, please. Order.

J. MacPhail: ...and upon examination of B.C. Rail, year after year, it got its marching orders.

Interjection.

Mr. Speaker: Order. Order, please. The Leader of the Opposition has the floor.

J. MacPhail: It was profitable. It became competitive. It shed its baggage, and the government of the day said B.C. Rail is needed for northern communities. What does this government do? They get behind closed doors, they shut their doors, they hold a secret process with their biggest political donors, and then they mis-

represent the value of that corporation. Well, pretty much everybody in northern British Columbia is on to this government now.

Every day or so over the last month, the government changed its story about why it's breaking the new-era promise on B.C. Rail. For the longest time the Minister of Transportation insisted that B.C. Rail just wasn't profitable. Well, clearly, this government wasn't examining the books in a way the previous governments did. Clearly, they were completely misrepresenting the status of that corporation.

Mr. Speaker: Please, order. Hon. member, we're getting dangerously close to unparliamentary wording with the use of the words "misrepresent" and "lying," so I would ask you to please come back to parliamentary language.

J. MacPhail: This government was continuously avoiding the revelation that B.C. Rail was a profitable corporation. When the opposition brought forward internal government documents showing that B.C. Rail is one of the most profitable rail companies in North America, the minister responsible quickly danced on the head of a pin. She changed her tune, and all of a sudden it wasn't that the corporation wasn't profitable; it was that the debt was too high. But then the opposition brought forward a B.C. Rail report for September 2003 that painted a very clear picture about its position in comparison to other companies. Some of those companies that compared poorly in their debt load to B.C. Rail are the very companies this government wants to sell B.C. Rail to now. Gee, that's going to be good for the customer, isn't it? Let's sell off a profitable corporation that can manage its debt to a big, high political donor who has a greater debt load and won't be able to give any competitive pricing to the customers.

The report showed that the debt-to-equity ratio for B.C. Rail as reported to the management of B.C. Rail is at 1.2. Compare that to the CN debt-equity ratio. That figure says that B.C. Rail is right in the thick of things, and it's exactly the same as CP's debt ratio. So the debt-to-equity ratio of B.C. Rail is exactly within the same parameters as the two major competitors to which this government wants to sell B.C. Rail for a song. They said: "Oh no, the debt load is way too hard for the corporation to manage." Well, no, it isn't. The shippers, the customers of B.C. Rail, are paying a competitive price because it's got a debt load that it can manage. The shippers ain't gonna get one iota of a break on pricing if the government gives this corporation away to CN or CP, because their debt-to-equity load is no better, and they're not nearly as profitable as B.C. Rail.

[1120]

If it's all about price competitiveness for customers, as the Liberals proclaim, then B.C. Rail is doing just fine. In fact, it's doing the best of any of the rail lines in British Columbia, and there's no need to sell it off. The minister was adamant that B.C. Rail's debt was out of control, but the debt ratio as listed in internal documents completely contradicts that assertion. The truth

is that the debt load at B.C. Rail is not out of control. It's completely competitive. My colleague the member for Vancouver-Mount Pleasant will explore that myth perpetuated by this government even further.

The Minister of Transportation and this Liberal government refuse to hear the facts around B.C. Rail, because it destroys their rationale for breaking their new-era promise. On the issue of profitability, other internal documents from B.C. Rail confirm that its profit was \$72 million last year, and it's going to make even more this year. B.C. Rail is a profitable company with a manageable debt and a reliable service as well as competitive prices. But once again, the Minister of Transportation switches her message box in a desperate attempt to justify the sell-off.

Two weeks ago the minister was arguing that improvements at B.C. Rail were the result of unexpected volume in the forestry sector and that she thought the forestry sector was going to do worse. She said: "Oh, don't be buoyed by a profitable B.C. Rail because of our forest sector. We can't count on our forest sector getting any better. In fact, it's probably going to go down, decline." Gee, what a great government this is. We need to sell off B.C. Rail because we've messed up the economy so badly that the forest sector is in decline.

She and all the rest of the B.C. Liberal MLAs went: "Yeah, that's right. Forestry is going to get worse. Forestry is on the decline, and that's why B.C. Rail can't be expected to sustain a profit." That doesn't hold any weight either. It's simply more evasion and more misinformation in a desperate attempt to hold on to a shred of credibility. Make no mistake: this sell-out is about a cash grab, not sound policy.

Here's some information uncovered and reported by the Prince George *Citizen* on November 7. The article refutes the minister's claim that B.C. Rail's turnaround is a one-hit wonder because of changes in the forest sector.

"B.C. Rail's operating turnaround in 2002 had more to do with its cost-cutting measures than increases in revenue from forest products, a review of the Crown corporation's financial results by the *Citizen* shows.

"The figures in the 2002 report appear to undermine arguments by both shippers and the B.C. Liberal government that B.C. Rail's improved financial results are not sustainable because they are a result of increased lumber shipments to counter the softwood lumber dispute within the U.S., shipments which both say won't last indefinitely.

"A growing coalition of business, political and labour representatives in Prince George argue there's no need to sell a profitable B.C. Rail. The Liberals and the shippers say a private operator is needed because B.C. Rail is hampered by a mountain of debt and doesn't provide adequate service."

I continue to quote from the Prince George *Citizen* article.

"B.C. Rail's 2002 annual report shows the forest products revenues were up six percent over 2001 to \$171 million. The impact from lumber shipment increases may be even less as lumber accounted for only one-third of forest product revenues and one-fifth of the total revenues. Our forest products shipped are pulp, wood chips, logs, poles and forest products.

"At the same time, operating expenses were reduced by \$37.2 million or 19 percent, which was noted as significant in the 2002 annual report. 'An overall focus on efficiency and higher-yield traffic, consistent with the '02-'04 strategic goals caused the reduction in expenses,' the annual report of B.C. Rail said.

"Other highlights of the 2002 financial results were improved income of \$51 million, reducing total operating expenses by \$25 million, and short- and long-term debt reduction by \$54 million."

[1125]

This is exactly what the B.C. Rail corporation has been doing throughout the 1990s and continues in '01, '02 and '03, because this government has not yet messed it up.

The company has become cost-competitive. It has shed its unproductive assets. It has a workforce that is top-of-the-line in the industry. The productivity of its workforce is unparalleled, and all of those changes have come about at great cost to those workers. Hundreds of jobs were shed by B.C. Rail throughout the 1990s. The result is a competitive, effective organization that returns a profit to the taxpayers and also offers a benefit solely for British Columbia and those northern communities.

It's time this government stopped trying to spin British Columbia. They have been evading the facts and spreading misinformation for months. The Minister of Transportation has been relentless in attacking the status of B.C. Rail. It's time this Liberal government paid attention to the facts. The financial statements and reports show that B.C. Rail's profit margins for regional carriers remain above Canadian National, Canadian Pacific and every other class of railways. B.C. Rail is the highest in the industry for its quarter profits as well as for its year-to-date profits.

Despite the minister's assertion to the contrary, B.C. Rail is competitive and efficient. They have the highest productivity rate amongst all rail lines, and they are the first rail line to have an operating margin of below 70 percent — the first rail line in all of North America to have an operating ratio where they spend about 69 cents to make a dollar. No other rail line in all of North America is that productive.

Interjection.

J. MacPhail: Oh God. Honestly, the lack of understanding of business concepts by this Liberal government never ceases to amaze me.

Interjections.

Mr. Speaker: Order, please.

Interjections.

Mr. Speaker: Order, please, hon. members. Order, please.

J. MacPhail: Unfortunately for them, the people of British Columbia are on to them. If the government pushes ahead with its plans to sell B.C. Rail....

P. Bell: How many seats do you have? I forget.

J. MacPhail: It also is very interesting — the arrogance of this government. The member for Prince George North says: "How many seats do you have?" Perhaps he got a seat because his Premier promised not to privatize B.C. Rail. Did he ever think of that?

Perhaps the reason why the members for Prince George are here is because...

Interjections.

Mr. Speaker: Order, please.

J. MacPhail: ...the Premier went and didn't tell the truth to the people of British Columbia. They sit here in their arrogance and refuse to acknowledge that they said something different during the election to the people of Prince George than what they're doing now. The arrogance is unbelievable.

If this government pushes ahead with its plans to sell B.C. Rail, British Columbians are going to lose a company that is profitable and competitive. Despite all of this, we hear from the government MLAs that the government's going to push ahead. They're so desperate for cash, desperate to compensate for their dismal economic record.

To save themselves, cabinet is going to sell B.C. Rail, break a fundamental election promise and sell out communities throughout this province like Squamish, Lillooet and Prince George. These are the communities already hurt by the crunch of the softwood lumber dispute, by school closures and by cuts to health care. Selling off B.C. Rail will only make things worse as hundreds of people along the B.C. Rail line are laid off. If the winning bidder is the chief Liberal donor, CN, the layoffs will be devastating. The Liberals are ready to throw that hardship onto B.C. communities and families for nothing more than a desperate cash grab.

[1130]

This bill is the last opportunity we have to stop the damage before it begins. It is time to protect this profitable asset and protect our communities against a minister, a cabinet, a government caucus and a Premier desperate for cash, desperate to privatize no matter what the cost to the communities is.

J. Kwan: I rise to enter the debate on this private member's bill. I think it's critically important that we get the facts on the table just so every member in this House knows what is going on with B.C. Rail. I must say that my colleague the Leader of the Opposition has laid out many of those facts. Let me just do a quick summary of that. Here's what she actually said, and here's what has been reported publicly — factual information that this Liberal government refuses to acknowledge and, in fact, tries to mask.

On the question from an economic point of view of where B.C. Rail stands on profitability, you will hear, as we have heard from the Minister of Transportation, that B.C. Rail is not profitable. You know what, Mr.

Speaker? The reality is that B.C. Rail is profitable and is making money for the province. That is what that rail service is doing. It is as profitable as the other competitors and is doing a good job in providing a service to British Columbians in their record.

The Minister of Transportation will have you believe, Mr. Speaker, that not only is B.C. Rail not profitable but that it is not competitive in its role. And you know what, Mr. Speaker? B.C. Rail is competitive. When you compare B.C. Rail on their profit margins and on their competitiveness, it is as competitive as its major competitors, CN and CP. You know what? When the Leader of the Opposition said B.C. Rail can actually make a dollar in revenues by spending only 69 cents on the dollar, the members in this House — including the member for Prince George—Mount Robson and the member for Prince George North — laughed outright.

They laughed outright as though there is somehow something wrong with that math. The only thing wrong with that math is what is going on in the Liberal government's mind, because when you can make a dollar by spending only 69 cents, it means a profit. The profit that B.C. Rail is earning for British Columbians should stay in the hands of British Columbians as a Crown asset for British Columbia. That is the ultimate competitiveness: when you can actually make a dollar by spending less than a dollar — 69 cents, in fact. That is a fact people cannot dispute.

I know the Minister of Transportation would have you believe that not only is B.C. Rail not competitive and not profitable but that somehow its debt ratio is completely out of control. Well, Mr. Speaker, a news flash for the Minister of Transportation and all of the Liberal MLAs: the debt ratio for B.C. Rail is very competitive. In fact, at a 1.2 ratio in terms of debt-equity, it is equivalent to that of the competitors who want to buy out B.C. Rail.

I am perplexed at the notion of why it is that this government wants to sell off B.C. Rail when, on the three major issues from an economic standpoint, B.C. Rail has proven to be on par and in some instances exceeding its competitors in its achievements. Why, then, would any government want to sell off this Crown jewel? Why would any government want to sell off a British Columbia asset that is making money, that is competitive, that has a manageable debt ratio and that is giving a return in service to British Columbians?

[1135]

Well, there are really two rationales I could think of. One is that the Minister of Finance is desperate to get a quick cash grab by selling B.C. Rail because of the Minister of Finance's failed economic strategy on the thing that they know — the tax cut that didn't pay for itself. That's one rationale.

The other rationale is this. Could it be that the people who want to buy B.C. Rail are major contributors to the Liberal party? Hmm, let me think about that. CN happened to be one of the major financial contributors to the Liberal party in the last election. Could it be that the Liberal government and this Premier are trying to pay off their corporate donors in the worst form — by

putting out wrong information on the profitability of B.C. Rail, wrong information on the competitiveness of B.C. Rail and wrong information on the debt ratio of B.C. Rail? By doing that, this government is trying to create an illusion that somehow B.C. Rail is a money loser and that the best option for government is to sell off B.C. Rail, when in fact nothing could be further to the contrary.

This government is creating a mythology around the performance of B.C. Rail. I would suggest that what they really want to do is two things. First, they do in fact want to pay off their corporate donors. Second, they want a quick cash grab to pay off their failed economic strategy.

Now, I know that all the Liberal government MLAs would just rise in this House and say: "The opposition MLAs don't know what they're talking about. We don't believe them. They're fearmongering." Somehow they're just saying: "Oh, you know, they're just fearmongering. They're presenting misinformation." Well, the facts are there for you to look at, Mr. Speaker, and not only that.... Funny how it is that some 32,000 British Columbians have signed a petition saying to the government: "Do not sell off B.C. Rail." That's 32,000 British Columbians.

In addition to that, you actually have council members, no less, from Prince George. Council from Prince George asked this government and passed a resolution telling this government to at least, in the minimum, put in a two-year moratorium before you sell off B.C. Rail. That's from Prince George, the community which the member for Prince George North and the member for Prince George-Mount Robson represent. I wonder where the representation is. I don't hear them rising up and saying: "We will protect B.C. Rail and not sell off B.C. Rail and betray our constituents." We don't hear that. Instead, we hear them laughing at the notion that B.C. Rail can make a profit by only spending 69 cents on the dollar in its operations.

Not only that, we actually have the UBCM. The Union of B.C. Municipalities passed a resolution in September saying to this Liberal government: "Do not sell off B.C. Rail. It is an asset for British Columbia, and it should stay as an asset for all of British Columbia." Where is this government that claims it listens to people? They've ignored a petition. They ignore the Union of B.C. Municipalities. They've ignored the Prince George council. Who else are they going to ignore?

[1140]

I just want to quote an article. In fact, it's a letter to the editor of the Prince George *Citizen*, November 12, 2003. It is very revealing when you look at this letter. Here's a portion. Well, actually, I will read the whole letter into the record, because it's a very good letter and it's not that long. It says:

"Dear Sir:

"Your Saturday editorial calling on our mayor to ignore the wishes of the majority of council and join the committee to sell B.C. Rail needs a response.

"Let us look at the committee Colin Kinsley was asked to join. First, it was only two mayors out of 25

along the rail line. No first nations, no business, no workers or citizens were allowed. Second, he would only get to review the final bid selected by the government, not all three. Third, he wouldn't be able to say much to those he represents because he would be asked to sign a confidentiality agreement.

"Why should city council support our mayor sitting on another committee that is exclusive, narrow and secretive? That's exactly what the city councillors voted against in the motion last Monday night. What a mixed message it would have sent if Mayor Kinsley joined the committee to sell B.C. Rail when council's direction was to lobby for a two-year moratorium to get more information.

"As for our city councillors not thinking of Prince George first, I wholeheartedly disagree. In the face of massive lobbying on behalf of the provincial government and vague promises of a bright future for B.C. Rail, they took a brave stand and stood with the citizens who are not so convinced. Council's decision not to support Kinsley's appointment should send a signal to the government that Prince George will not be on the cheerleading team to sell B.C. Rail.

"Mr. Premier, what we want is open and public consultation. Show us the bids. Show us the benefits. Show us why you want to break your promise. Then all of us, not just our mayor, will be able to make an informed decision.

"The provincial government should take the exclusion of Colin Kinsley for what it's worth — an attempt to wake up Victoria to the fact that we're not here to serve them but rather serve our citizens, who have major concerns with the sale of B.C. Rail. If they want to seek some input into a more effective and representative committee structure, please feel free to call the public. We are in the phone book.

"Ron East"

You know, the members elected from Prince George in this House could take a lesson from their own constituent, Ron East, from Prince George — who, by the way, is a Liberal — who's saying to them: "Don't be a cheerleader for the government. Get up and respond, and make sure, first and foremost, you act in the best interests of Prince George." The member for Prince George North and the member for Prince George-Mount Robson, the Minister of Advanced Education, could take a lesson from their own constituent, from their own community, from their own party.

The other piece of information that I just want to share with this House is this. The Minister of Transportation and the Liberal MLAs would say that B.C. Rail's debt ratio is too high. Do you know what? News flash: when they came into office, the Liberal government added some six times more debt to the books in just one year. That's what they have to show for their economic record. They brought in an economic policy that has failed, and now they are selling off and wanting to sell off our most treasured assets to bail them out.

They are failing British Columbians. Not only are they breaking the promise in their *New Era* document that said, "We will not sell off B.C. Rail," they are betraying British Columbians who put their trust in them to manage effectively the assets of British Columbians and to maintain those assets for generations to come.

They're hurting the economy by doing so. They're hurting the heartlands by doing so. It is wrong.

I urge — in fact, I challenge — the Liberal members in this House to vote in support of my colleague's motion and to tell this Liberal government to not sell off B.C. Rail.

[1145]

P. Nettleton: I rise in support of this bill, which is a private member's bill intended to stop the sale of B.C. Rail.

My perspective is a little different, I think, from the members of the opposition, in that my first encounter with folks in Prince George who had strong feelings with respect to B.C. Rail dates back to 1996 during the election campaign, when I was going door to door with my wife. I hadn't lived in that part of the country terribly long at the time, so for me it was an introduction of myself, and it was also an opportunity to listen and learn from folks in terms of what was important to them.

One of the things that was brought to my attention during that campaign — as I say, it was the campaign of 1996 — was that B.C. Rail was an issue that ran very deep in terms of people's emotional attachment. During the course of that campaign, I also ran into a number of men — I don't know that I ran into any women, but certainly a number of men — who supported their families working for B.C. Rail. I recall some of them telling me, in fact: "You know, you seem like a decent enough guy, and the B.C. Liberal Party is a party that has a lot of appeal. But B.C. Rail is, for us, a big issue, and that's an issue on which we're going to cast our vote." This meant, in fact, that the vote would be cast not for the B.C. Liberals but rather for the NDP.

That was my first introduction to B.C. Rail and, as I say, the strong sentiment not only in Prince George but beyond with respect to the issue of B.C. Rail and the sale of B.C. Rail. The election of 1996 — for those of us that were there, and I know there are a few members here who were there in 1996 and were fortunate enough to be elected in 1996 — certainly didn't have the result that I had expected, in that I was the only member elected as a B.C. Liberal in the north. Certainly, B.C. Rail was part of that outcome, I expect.

Following the election — the election which saw a majority NDP government and a very strong but nevertheless unsuccessful B.C. Liberal opposition — one of the things that happened was the then Leader of the Opposition, who is now Premier, met with us. I recall him meeting with me in Prince George and assigning roles to members of the then opposition, now government, to take on critic portfolios. I remember meeting with the Leader of the Opposition, and he assigned to me the role as critic of B.C. Rail. So I gladly took that task on.

For those of us here that recall what it was like to be a critic, I think there were a lot of benefits in terms of really digging deep into a given ministry, or a subset of a ministry in this case. B.C. Rail, of course, fell within the ministry for which the then minister, Dan Miller, was responsible, which involved northern interests, energy and mines, and so forth. I gladly took on that role. Again, as I say, it had been brought to my atten-

tion during the course of the election. I knew that the then Leader of the Opposition had committed to the province as a whole that he would sell B.C. Rail, and there was some sense in which that was problematic, particularly for those candidates of the north that were defeated.

[1150]

Being a critic involved doing a number of things beyond just asking questions during the estimates process. It involved the opportunity to travel to North Vancouver and meet with the then head and CEO of CN and head of B.C. Rail, Paul McElligott, and his board. Paul McElligott, who is now the CEO of TimberWest, was really a free enterprise kind of guy. Under his watch, B.C. Rail was really run in very much a free enterprise type of setting, as much as one can achieve that within the context of a Crown corporation. It was highly diversified; it involved much more than just the railbeds. It involved BCR Ventures, which involved joint ventures in mining and so forth throughout the north. It had a real estate arm, it had a telecommunications arm, and it had Vancouver Wharves. In any event it was highly diversified, highly successful, and paid large dividends to the provincial government at the time — millions of dollars every year. Well, not every year, but certainly it generated millions of dollars, and on occasion it was tapped for those moneys.

It was interesting to meet with Mr. McElligott to get some sense of the challenges with respect to B.C. Rail. One of the things we did as critics, of course, was report out to the other opposition members with respect to our findings as to the direction, in this instance, of B.C. Rail.

My position personally hasn't changed with respect to B.C. Rail. I understand, I think, something of the emotional attachment with respect to B.C. Rail from men and women who have in many cases worked their lives on B.C. Rail and have seen the north opened up to development and opportunity and growth, and so forth, as government has shown a commitment to the north by way of B.C. Rail over the years. My position certainly hasn't changed, but the Premier, the then Leader of the Opposition, following the election of 1996 publicly made an apology with respect to B.C. Rail. Our position — that is, the B.C. Liberals' position on B.C. Rail — firmly committed that we had learned our lesson. In fact, we would not sell B.C. Rail should we be successful in 2001.

Now, the B.C. Liberals talk about new-era commitments. I took that to be a commitment. I took the Premier, the man who's now the Premier, at his word — that when he said we would not sell B.C. Rail, he was as good as his word. That, we now know, is not the case. Shortly after the election of 2001, we see a government that has moved very quickly. There's been speculation as to why that might be, why there's been this flip-flop, this breaking of the commitment on B.C. Rail. I think the opposition has laid out rather carefully and in a way that people can understand some of the reasons why, perhaps, government is now moving as it is to sell B.C. Rail.

One of the things I will say quickly in closing, because I know I'm running out of time, is that the public sentiment with respect to B.C. Rail — the same sentiment that I encountered in 1996 going door to door in Prince George talking to people — hasn't changed. People are for the most part, along the line and certainly in Prince George and beyond, opposed to the sale of B.C. Rail — what's left of B.C. Rail, given that B.C. Rail now really is just the freight service. Everything else has been sold off, so B.C. Rail is not what it used to be.

That public sentiment hasn't changed, and I'm delighted to be able to stand here today in support of this bill which has been introduced by the opposition. Thank God there's something of an opposition here. I shudder to think what in fact would happen if there wasn't. I'm delighted to stand here for my constituents and say that I support this bill, and I oppose the sale of B.C. Rail.

Noting the hour, I move that the question be put.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. member, there are still five minutes to go till noon, and the Chair perceives that there are many members who wish to debate this bill, so I will recognize the member for Prince George North.

[1155]

P. Bell: The Chair would be accurate. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I think we need to set some facts straight. There's been a lot of rhetoric that's gone on in this chamber for the last hour or so, and the facts speak pretty clearly for themselves. The opposition members have talked about profitability of B.C. Rail, and I think we need to take a look at the period from 1991 to 2001, when the now Leader of the Opposition was on the government side of the benches and actually ran B.C. Rail. The facts are pretty simple. The facts are that, according to the audited financial statements provided and available on the website of B.C. Railway, they lost over \$400 million from the period 1991 to 2001.

That is the fact. That is plain and simple. Go to the B.C. Rail website and pull down the financial statements. It's plain and clear.

Interjections.

Mr. Speaker: Order, please. The member for Prince George North has the floor.

P. Bell: In fact, that's when you do add in — I'll be cautious — that in 1993 and 1992, subsidies continued to flow from the province of British Columbia to B.C. Rail Company, at which point the government of the day in 1993 decided that B.C. Rail had to stand on its own two feet and actually operate as a profitable entity, and it did so with very limited success.

I am actually tempted in some ways to support this bill because we are, in fact, not privatizing B.C. Rail.

Interjections.

Mr. Speaker: Order.

P. Bell: In many ways I'm tempted to support this bill. However, it is unfortunate that this bill would also not allow B.C. Rail to do something as simple as selling an old truck it had in its yard that was no longer effective. It would not do something as simple as having an independent third-party passenger rail service operate up and down the line.

We have tremendous interest in third-party passenger rail right now. We have two proponents who are eager to enter into an RFP process to actually bring the benefits of an independent operator. This and the decisions we are making here....

Interjection.

Mr. Speaker: Order, please.

P. Bell: The decision we made here is actually to bring the benefits of having an independent operator who can run efficiently up and down the line and provide the benefits of investment from the private sector, bringing incremental volumes to the rail line.

I often hear from my constituents that it is a serious concern that there is far more lumber travelling on the highway system today as a result of the inability of B.C. Rail to service that end of the business. Clearly, anyone that drives back and forth from Prince George on a regular basis will understand that there are huge deficiencies in our highway system as a direct result of the incremental volumes that are moving on the highway today.

We need investment in B.C. Rail. We need to ensure that we maintain control over the system. I want to add just briefly, even though I know we're nearing our time, and I'm going to want to speak to this again down the road....

Do you know what, Mr. Speaker? In the early 1980s the then government took the highway system and kept the asphalt and the roadbed underneath the highway system, and they said: "Let's get the benefits of an independent operator to maintain the highway system for us." Well, today what are we doing? We're keeping the railway, we're keeping the line, we're keeping the tracks, and we're going to have an independent operator actually run the thing and bring those efficiencies forward. I'd like people to think about that, because I think the highway systems work pretty well.

Noting the time, I'd like to move adjournment of debate and retain my position.

P. Bell moved adjournment of debate.

Motion approved.

Hon. G. Abbott moved adjournment of the House.

Motion approved.

Mr. Speaker: The House is adjourned until 2 p.m. today.

The House adjourned at 11:59 a.m.