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

6TH SESSION, 37TH PARLIAMENT

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Afternoon Sitting

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WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 16, 2005

The House met at 2:04 p.m.

Prayers.

[1405]

Introductions by Members

Hon. I. Chong: It is my pleasure to recognize in the gallery distinguished members of Rotary International and also to proclaim February 21 to 27, 2005, Rotary International Week.

Rotary International was founded in 1905 and now has over 1.2 million Rotary club members composed of professional and business leaders in over 31,000 clubs in more than 165 countries. The service of Rotary clubs around the world is exemplary, from working with the World Health Organization to eradicate polio to being the world's largest privately funded source of international scholarships to fundraising to send aid to developing nations while still addressing needs of their individual communities. Their motto, "Service above self," is true to form.

It is with great pleasure that I officially proclaim, on behalf of the province, the week of February 21 to 27, 2005, as Rotary International Week. We have in the gallery many guests who are Rotarians, but please join with me in welcoming the district governors. They are Mr. Dick Drew, Mr. Ron Neukomm, Mr. Gary Hollick, Mr. Derek Bottomley, Mr. Lloyd Gray, Mr. Bruce Christensen and their respective clubs. Would the House please make them very welcome.

D. Hayer: It gives me great pleasure to introduce four special guests to this House today. Visiting from my riding of Surrey-Tynehead is Mr. Rashpal Sidhu, owner of Fraserview Cedar Products sawmill. Visiting from Ontario is Mr. Jaswinder Sidhu, who is a journalist. Also, visiting from India are journalist Mr. Rajinder S. Taggar and Mr. Varinder Kumar, assistant inspector general for the Punjab police. Would the House please join me in making them very welcome.

Hon. G. Plant: I hope all members of the House will join with me in welcoming to the gallery in the precincts today six distinguished Richmond Rotarians — very accomplished citizens in their community and people who help make the world work: Magdalen Leung, John Yap, Michael Chiu, David Rogers, Gail Maida and Cynthia Chen.

Hon. P. Wong: Today in the gallery I would like to acknowledge a special visitor from France, the newly appointed Ambassador of France to Canada, His Excellency Daniel Jouanneau. This is the ambassador's first official visit to our province. I am pleased he has travelled to British Columbia to discover the many opportunities our beautiful province presents. He is accompanied by his wife and by Mr. Jean-Yves Defay, the consul general of France at Vancouver, and his wife.

Would the House please make them all feel very welcome. *Merci beaucoup.*

J. Reid: On behalf of my colleague from the North Island, I would like to welcome the president and members from the Campbell River Rotary Club. May the House make them welcome.

Hon. T. Christensen: Mr. Speaker, as you well know, for the first time ever we actually know when the next election date is going to be here in British Columbia. It's a real step forward in terms of transparency. Needless to say, it also provides a great opportunity for British Columbia's students to learn about the election process and to observe it and become involved.

Today it's my great pleasure to introduce to the House two representatives from Student Vote. We have with us today Taylor Gunn and Lindsay Mazuko. Their organization will be working in partnership with the Ministry of Education as well as a number of other educational partners — including, I believe, the BCTF, the principals and vice-principals, and the superintendents association — to deliver an innovative educational program organized by youth for youth.

[1410]

These are non-partisan instructional materials that they will distribute to schools. I'm told that in the last two days alone more than 40 schools from across our province, from Kitimat to right here in Victoria, have enrolled. It will allow students an opportunity to actually participate in the election process, to cast a ballot at the same time that voters around British Columbia are casting a ballot, and hopefully will provide an opportunity for students to see the importance of the electoral process. They will, in fact, vote once they are 18. Would you please join me in welcoming these two guests to the House today.

J. Nuraney: I'm very pleased to introduce 25-plus members of the Burnaby Rotary Club, who are with us today led by their president, Peter Beynon.

Among the guests, I also have the president of my riding association, Neil MacKay, and his wife, Jeanette. I would request the House to please give a warm welcome to our guests.

K. Manhas: I'd like to introduce to the House today a wonderful woman from my constituency of Port Coquitlam-Burke Mountain, Louise Thorburn, who is here today meeting with the Minister of Community, Aboriginal and Women's Services on behalf of students in Coquitlam, Port Coquitlam, Port Moody, Anmore and Belcarra.

She decided to come and take a look at us doing business in the House. Louise heads up CLOC, the Coquitlam school district's continuing education storefront school, on Westwood in my riding. She's helped many men and women build a new start to their lives through her work. She's very involved in our community. She's a strong woman who stands up for what she

believes in. She's a fellow Rotarian at Rotary of Coquitlam Sunrise. She's a wonderful person, and I'm glad to have her here. On behalf of my colleagues the member for Port Moody–Westwood, Burquitlam and Coquitlam–Maillardville, I would like to welcome her here. Would the House please make her welcome.

B. Kerr: The South Cowichan Rotary Club provides a tremendous service to our community, and they're a great group of people. I would like to introduce Elly Rugge from that club and her husband, Michael Rugge, as a member of the Victoria Rotary Club. I would like the House to make them both feel very welcome.

R. Sultan: I would like to introduce two distinguished Rotarians: Otto Massey and Jacci Mctavish, who is also an active member in the West Vancouver Coho Society, which is dedicated to the restoration of salmon and steelhead, particularly in our North Shore rivers and streams.

R. Masi: On behalf of my colleague the member for Delta South, I would like to introduce, from the Ladner Rotary Club, Graham Witcher and Brenda Sheen.

From my riding of Delta North, I have visiting today Mr. Pio Mason, the vice-president of our local association, accompanied by his wife, Joan. Also with them are Dorothy Giles, a longtime party supporter and family friend, as well as Dorothy's friend, Enid Herbert. Would the House please make them all welcome.

D. Hayer: On behalf of all my colleagues from Surrey as well as Surrey–White Rock, I would like to welcome all the members of Rotary from Surrey who do a great job, as well as our district governor, Gary Hollick, who also does a great job. Would the House make them all very welcome.

Hon. G. Bruce: I tremble as I rise for fear of what I may say, but with the Clerk nodding approvingly, I would like to acknowledge the Rotarians from my community. Mr. Speaker, I hope that you won't rule me out of order for being repetitious, but the Rotarians in my community do a tremendous job, as we know they do in all of the communities throughout British Columbia. Would the House please make them welcome as well.

Introduction and First Reading of Bills

Hon. I. Chong presented a message from Her Honour the Lieutenant-Governor: a bill intituled Thompson Rivers University Act.

[1415]

THOMPSON RIVERS UNIVERSITY ACT

Hon. I. Chong: I move that Bill 2 be introduced and read a first time now.

Motion approved.

Hon. I. Chong: On March 19, 2004, the Premier announced that the University College of the Cariboo would be transformed into a special-purpose university. On September 22, 2004, the Premier announced that the name for the newly created university would be Thompson Rivers University. This name was chosen from a list of 171 suggestions, as it reflects the geographical region that the university is intended to serve.

This bill being introduced today will establish the legislative framework on which the Thompson Rivers University will be built. It will merge the former University College of the Cariboo with components of the Open Learning Agency to create a special-purpose university that aims to meet the needs of the region as well as provide a variety of on-line and distance education learning opportunities for the province.

This bill establishes a university council which will possess many of the duties and powers of the senate under the University Act. In addition, the legislation provides for the creation of a planning council for open learning, which will implement the provincial open learning mandate and set admission and residency requirements for the open learning section of the university.

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

Bill 2 introduced, read a first time and ordered to be placed on orders of the day for second reading at the next sitting of the House after today.

Statements (Standing Order 25B)

ROTARY INTERNATIONAL

J. Nuraney: February 23 will mark the 100th year of Rotary. Rotary was founded in Chicago by an attorney named Paul Harris. The name Rotary derived from the early practice of rotating meetings among members' offices. In the decade that followed, Rotary's popularity spread rapidly throughout the United States. Later the organization was renamed Rotary International and assumed an international stature when it admitted foreign chapters in six countries, including the first Canadian chapter in Winnipeg in 1912.

As Rotary grew, its mission expanded beyond serving the professional and social interests of club members. The organization's dedication to humanitarian causes is best expressed in its principal motto, which says "Service above self." Rotary later adopted a code of ethics called the four-way test, which has been translated into dozens of languages around the world.

Among Rotary's numerous international humanitarian and educational programs, eradication of polio worldwide stands out as its best achievement. Millions of children have been immunized against this debilitating disease.

I've had the pleasure of not only being a member of the Burnaby Rotary Club but also the privilege of being president of that club for a while. I have experienced and seen the impact that Rotary has and what it has made in my community. I have enjoyed the camaraderie and the friendship of the club. Over the years, I am proud to say that Burnaby Rotary Club has launched various initiatives including an outreach program that feeds hungry children and establishing and maintaining a residence for people with disabilities.

Recently we helped establish a project called Clubfoot in several developing countries including Uganda, Malawi and Mozambique. This project corrects defects in children born with club feet and helps them to walk.

Rotary has played an important role in my life, and I take this opportunity to wish all my fellow Rotarians a happy 100th anniversary.

TAX INCENTIVE FOR USE OF PUBLIC TRANSIT

J. Bray: In the last year, the Victoria community has done a great deal of work around what the future of the city and region might look like in the years ahead. One of the areas of focus has been looking at how to improve downtown transportation. One of the key ingredients to improvements that were identified was increasing the number of commuters who use public transit as their choice for coming in and out of downtown. Better service, more routes, more night buses, etc., are all potential options.

[1420]

I would like to focus on an idea that has been proven in other jurisdictions to improve ridership among car-owning commuters. The idea would be to make employer-provided bus passes tax-exempt. Currently, if an employee were to receive a bus pass from their employer, it would be viewed as a taxable benefit — thus making it a costly option, especially if the employee owns a vehicle and has a free parking space at work. This option would level the playing field for employer-supported commuter options.

The U.S. has passed legislation that allows for these employer-provided bus passes to be tax-exempt. Quebec is currently reviewing this option. Studies have shown that this form of tax change can increase ridership by as much as 16 percent.

I believe that B.C. should take a lead in encouraging the federal government to make this change and to amend our own tax rules accordingly. Victoria and, indeed, every urban centre in Canada need to find real ways of encouraging more people to move from their cars to public transit. For Victoria there are the obvious environmental benefits from commuting by public transit, but there are also benefits to the movement of goods and services throughout our downtown core. It reduces wear and tear on the infrastructure and makes downtown a friendlier and quieter place for tourists and residents alike. I'll continue to work with my community to find real solutions to move more of us from our cars to public transit.

LONG-TERM CARE

K. Krueger: Big union boss Jim Sinclair, who wants to be the unelected Premier of British Columbia again, as he was in the nineties, is making it clear he wants this province's clock turned back.

To consider the state of seniors care in British Columbia at that time, I'd like to read from a November 2000 press release from the NDP brain trust, the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives. You remember, the NDP were so fond of these people that on their way out the door, they gave them \$200,000 from British Columbia taxpayers' funds. This is what they reported about the NDP: "Community and continuing care has been seriously eroded over the past decade. Hospital stays declined by almost half in the 1990s with no parallel investment in community and continuing care. Between 1994 and 1999 the number of public long-term care beds fell by 18 percent." Even the NDP's friends could not believe how badly the government treated our seniors during their decade of misused power.

We conducted the first-ever review of seniors care facilities in 2002, and the results were dismaying. The average age of seniors facilities was more than 30 years old. They were overcrowded. Seniors were forced to share small washrooms and live in buildings with poor security or none. The facilities were unable to respond to basic care needs such as mechanical lifts and wheelchair access. Staff were being injured as a result.

The conditions the NDP left our seniors in were deplorable. Even worse, they had absolutely no plan or desire to improve those facilities. Before we reformed the health care system in B.C., the average wait time for a senior to get into a residential care facility was one year. Now it is down to between 60 and 90 days.

In a 100-day period recently, the interior health authority tracked the complaints about seniors placement, and there were only seven complaints in 100 days. The NDP failed to build any continuing care or extended care beds in our whole health region in their entire ten miserable years in power. We're on our third new facility in Kamloops, and I'm tremendously proud of the record of this government in seniors care.

Mr. Speaker: That concludes members' statements.

Oral Questions

DEBATE OF BUDGET ESTIMATES

J. Brar: The Premier pledged before the last election to create the most open, democratic and accountable government in Canada — a promise made and a promise broken. Will the Minister of Finance tell us: what is in the quarter-billion-dollar pre-election slush fund?

Hon. C. Hansen: I'm glad the member for Surrey-Panorama Ridge acknowledged the commitment that was made by this government to make this government the most transparent ever. In fact, we've actually won awards for the move that we've done to generally

accepted accounting principles and the fact that we now have the most transparent budget process that has ever been in this province. No longer can we see in British Columbia the kind of fudge-it budgets that we saw during the NDP years.

There is budget allocated for the coming year to the various ministries of government, and that is going to allow those ministries to expend funds over the 12 months of the fiscal year. In due course, all of those details will be made available to the member.

[1425]

Mr. Speaker: The member for Surrey–Panorama Ridge has a supplementary question.

J. Brar: Mr. Speaker, you know, I didn't ask that question to ask what is the decision of the government or what the policy of the government is. The question is very simple. The minister plans to spend a quarter of a billion dollars before the election, and he won't even tell us what it is for. Yesterday in the lockup...

Interjections.

Mr. Speaker: Please, hon. members. Quiet, please.

J. Brar: ...he assured British Columbians that every line of the budget will get debated in estimates, ministry by ministry, line by line. Will the Minister of Finance make this same commitment to British Columbians again today, or is this...

Interjections.

Mr. Speaker: Order, please.

J. Brar: ...another B.C. Liberal flip-flop?

Hon. C. Hansen: I just remind the member — he may not be aware of some of this history — that his colleague from Vancouver–Hastings actually introduced something in this House, to the province, called a mental health plan — \$125 million. Guess what. It wasn't funded.

Actually, Corky Evans, when he was running for the leadership of the NDP...

Interjections.

Mr. Speaker: Order, please.

Hon. C. Hansen: ...acknowledged that they had made an announcement for which...

Interjections.

Mr. Speaker: Order, please.

Hon. C. Hansen: ...there was no approved funding. The member is not correct when he says that there's a quarter of a billion dollars in the Ministry of Small

Business and Economic Development that would be spent before the end of the year. Everything that would be spent before the end of the year is itemized in the supplemental estimates that are in the budget documents. Those supplemental estimates will be presented to the House and will be debated. The member can have a chance to ask whatever questions he wants then and to vote yes or no.

Mr. Speaker: The member for Surrey–Panorama Ridge has a further supplementary.

J. Brar: Yet another broken promise — a very fresh one. It took less than 24 hours to break this one.

Again to the minister: how can he justify pouring a quarter-billion dollars into a slush fund for Liberal MLAs without a full and complete debate in the Legislature?

Hon. C. Hansen: I acknowledge that the member is a new member, but the way the process works is that you actually come with the estimates for spending by the ministries. Those were presented yesterday; they were made public. The member can go through that.

What we will do is ask for the approval of the Legislature before money gets spent — unlike what happened under the NDP government, where they relied on supplemental estimates that did not go through full legislative debate before the money was spent.

That is the way the process works. That's the way it should have worked under the NDP. We are living up to those obligations.

J. Kwan: Let's understand what's going on. The B.C. Liberals bring on an election budget that few believe and hide a quarter-billion-dollar secret slush fund in fine print. A budget that does not meet the commitment....

Interjections.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. members, the member for Vancouver–Mount Pleasant has the floor.

J. Kwan: A budget that does not meet the commitment on long-term care beds.... Now they want to run away from this place as fast as possible to hit the campaign trail with no scrutiny. Why is the Minister of Finance afraid to debate his budget in this House before May 17? What is he running from? What is he afraid of?

Hon. C. Hansen: I want to take the member back a little bit in history to 1996. It was actually the first election that I stood for election and the first time that she stood for election. In that election, actually, a Premier of the day by the name of...

Interjections.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. members, let us hear the answer to the question, please.

Hon. C. Hansen: ...Glen Clark brought in a budget and then did not even allow one day of debate in this Legislature before calling an election.

[1430]

The rules of this House provide for six days of debate on the budget. That will happen. The members can make a decision. They can either vote for this budget at the end of the six days, or they can vote against it. I would caution that if they vote against it, they do so at their peril, given the great feedback that we're getting on this budget from every corner of British Columbia.

Mr. Speaker: Member for Vancouver–Mount Pleasant has a supplementary question.

J. Kwan: Well, there's a revelation: the Minister of Finance's new standards — that he will be just like Glen Clark. Let me quote the new-era commitment.

Interjections.

Mr. Speaker: Order, please.

J. Kwan: That's the new standard for this Minister of Finance.

Interjections.

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

[Mr. Speaker rose.]

Interjections.

Mr. Speaker: Order, please, hon. members. Let us hear the questions and the answers.

[Mr. Speaker resumed his seat.]

J. Kwan: Let me quote the *New Era* document: "Our plan will deliver real, transparent, accountable government."

To the members: you live and die by your own swords.

To the Minister of Finance: if that was the promise, why is he afraid to debate his pre-election budget line by line, before May 17?

Interjections.

Mr. Speaker: Order, please. Let us hear the answer.

Hon. C. Hansen: Today is the first of those six days of debate, and I know I'm anxious to hear as much of the NDP's contribution as possible.

I made a commitment in the lockup that the supplemental estimates for the moneys that would be spent this year would be debated line by line. I also indicated that I know there is going to be the full six days of debate, unlike what we saw in 1996 when Glen

Clark pulled the pin and called an election before there could be debate in this Legislature.

J. MacPhail: This government is going to have to run on its own record and is scared to death. They're so scared that they're invoking the names of people from the past that they have ridiculed and denigrated, and they're now embracing those people. Shame on them.

Here's what the Premier said....

Interjections.

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

J. MacPhail: Here's what the Premier said after '96, '97, '98. Here's what he said in 2001. I quote the Premier: "We will act boldly and decisively to open up government."

The opposition has questions on long-term care. There isn't one Liberal MLA who will address that. We have questions on overspending in the Ministry of Management Services. We have questions on B.C. Liberal mismanagement on children in care.

To the Minister of Finance: there won't be one Liberal MLA that will address those issues during the six days. Why will you not commit to having a full line-by-line debate? We've got plenty of time. Why are you afraid to have your budget scrutinized?

Hon. C. Hansen: I have no doubt that my colleagues in this chamber from all parts of the province will be engaging in a rigorous debate over these six days of budget debate on all of the subjects that she has talked about.

Mr. Speaker: Leader of the Opposition has a supplementary question.

J. MacPhail: There won't be one Liberal MLA who asks questions about the unprecedented expansion in gaming. There won't be one Liberal MLA who asks why the debt is going up under this government.

Here's what the Premier said in 2001 after he was sworn in.

Interjections.

Mr. Speaker: Order, please.

J. MacPhail: "We think openness beats hiddenness every time, and we want to be sure that people can see what's taking place." What the Premier forgot to say was: "Except if it's 90 days before an election and we want to hide a quarter-of-a-billion-dollar slush fund."

To the Government House Leader: will he stand up and live up to his responsibility as Government House Leader and ensure that every line of this budget is debated in the full light of day by April 15?

[1435]

Hon. C. Hansen: What was presented yesterday to the public — up on the website, can be viewed from

anywhere around the world — is the most transparent set of budget documents that have ever been produced in British Columbia.

Interjections.

Mr. Speaker: Order.

Hon. C. Hansen: No longer can any government in this province get away with the kind of fudge-it budgets we saw in the 1990s. I would refer the member to page 136 of the estimates book — which her colleague called fine print, but it is all there. It's out....

Interjection.

Hon. C. Hansen: Well, it's....

Mr. Speaker, I would actually refer the member back to her own budget that she brought in in 1996 — or 1999, was it? — where she actually sets out spending for the various ministries that they can then draw against as they make decisions and make announcements during the coming fiscal year. This year is no exception.

RELEASE OF COMPTROLLER GENERAL REPORT ON COLUMBIA BASIN TRUST CONTRACTS

E. Brenzinger: I keep hearing the word "transparent." My question is to the Minister of Energy. Seven months ago it was reported in the *Trail Times* that this government was investigating over \$1.5 million in contracts awarded by Columbia Basin Trust to the ZE PowerGroup. Ken Epp, who is the CEO of Columbia Basin Trust, also works for ZE Power. Thus we have the boss of Columbia Basin Trust also doing the work that the same company's largest supplier, ZE Power, which is a perceived conflict of interest....

Can the Minister of Energy please inform the House why Mr. Epp has not been suspended, and can the minister please inform the House when we can expect the report from the office of the comptroller general — hopefully before the election — to be publicly released?

Hon. R. Neufeld: The member is quite right. There is an investigation going on in the hiring by the Columbia Basin Trust, I want to tell you, of Mr. Ken Epp and ZE Power. That's being fully investigated, and I hope that report is out fairly soon. I'd like to have it out sooner than later.

DEBATE OF BUDGET ESTIMATES

J. Kwan: It is this Liberal government who put in fixed election dates. It is this government who put in a fixed calendar. There is plenty of time to engage in line-by-line estimates debate for this pre-election budget. There are only 74 Liberal MLAs and three opposition members and two independents. There is every opportunity to engage in this debate.

I ask this question of the Minister of Finance: what is he afraid of? Why won't he debate estimates? Why won't he engage in estimates debate line by line before May 17?

Hon. C. Hansen: I actually think one of the more fundamental questions that needs to be asked is: where is the leader of the NDP? Where is she hiding? You know, she had an opportunity....

Interjections.

Mr. Speaker: Order, please. Order. Order, please. Order. Let us hear the answer.

Hon. C. Hansen: The leader of their party had the opportunity to seek a seat in this Legislature and decided to run instead. Now she's not there. I think the question a lot of British Columbians are asking is why their leader isn't in this House to be part of these coming six days of budget debate.

[End of question period.]

Interjections.

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

Interjections.

Mr. Speaker: Order, please.

Orders of the Day

Hon. G. Plant: I call Motion 74 standing in my name in the orders of the day.

Motions on Notice

B.C. JUDGES COMPENSATION COMMISSION RECOMMENDATIONS

Hon. G. Plant: I move Motion 74.

[That the Legislative Assembly reject five recommendations of the Report to the Attorney General of British Columbia and the Chief Judge of the Provincial Court of British Columbia, pursuant to section 5 (3) of the Judicial Compensation Act, Final Report of the 2004 British Columbia Judges Compensation Commission, as laid before this Assembly on October 7, 2004 and again, pursuant to section 6 (1) (c) of the Judicial Compensation Act, on February 9, 2005, for reasons outlined in Response to the 2004 Report of the Judges Compensation Commission filed in this House February 9, 2005, pursuant to section 6 (2) of the Judicial Compensation Act.

1. The recommended salary increase for January 1, 2004 until March 31, 2005 of an amount based on the change in the British Columbia CPI (the "BC-CPI") over the period of January 1, 2003 - December 31, 2003, is rejected as unreasonable and unfair. The substitute provision is zero increase for January 1, 2004 - March 31, 2005.

2. The recommended salary increase for fiscal year 2005/06 in the amount of the change in the BC-CPI from January 1, 2004 - March 31, 2005 is rejected as unreasonable and unfair. The substitute provision is zero increase for fiscal year 2005/06.

3. The recommendation that salary differentials for the Chief Judge and Associate Chief Judges be retained when they leave office and resume duties as regular Provincial Court Judges is rejected as unreasonable and unfair. The substitute provision is that salary differentials will not be retained when an incumbent leaves office as Chief Judge or as an Associate Chief Judge.

4. The recommendation that, effective January 1, 2004, the judges' allowance for professional development be raised from \$2000 to \$3000 per judge per annum, and a one-year carry over of any used portion of the allowance be permitted is rejected as unreasonable and unfair. The substitute provision is that, effective April 1, 2005, the judges' allowance for professional development be raised from \$2000 to \$3000 per judge per annum and a one-year carry over of any unused portion of the allowance be permitted.

5. The recommendation that the professional development allowances continue to be administered through the Chief Judge's Office, subject to his or her sole discretion to approve incidental expenses incurred by a judge for the fit and proper execution of his or her office is rejected as unreasonable and unfair. The substitute provision is that effective April 1, 2005, subject to the discretion of the Chief Judge and administered through the Office of the Chief Judge, the professional development allowance may be used to reimburse the following expenses incurred by a judge for professional development related to the duties of a Provincial Court Judge:

- a. Books, periodicals and subscriptions;
- b. Computer software;
- c. Internet access fees;
- d. Professional association membership dues;
- e. Courses, seminars and conferences including travel and expenses incidental to attendance.

That the Legislative Assembly accept the remaining recommendations contained in the Report to the Attorney General of British Columbia and the Chief Judge of the Provincial Court of British Columbia, pursuant to section 5 (3) of the Judicial Compensation Act, Final Report of the 2004 British Columbia Judges Compensation Commission.]

[1440]

In addition to moving Motion 74, I also move the amendment as follows:

[I move that Motion 74 standing in my name on the Order Paper be amended as follows:

1. By substituting the date "February 14, 2005" for the date "February 9, 2005" wherever it appears in the first paragraph of the said motion.
2. By substituting the word "unused" for the word "used" in the first sentence of paragraph no. 4 of the said motion.]

On the amendment.

Hon. G. Plant: I tabled a copy of those amendments with the Clerk just now. The amendments merely address clerical errors made in the preparation of the text of Motion 74.

Amendment approved.

On the motion as amended.

Hon. G. Plant: I want to say a word or two about Motion 74 and also about Motion 75, in a sense, in anticipation.

The two motions that I hope we will have an opportunity to pass — certainly, that we will have an opportunity to debate this afternoon — speak to important aspects of our judicial system in British Columbia. One of the most fundamental aspects of our judicial system is the idea of judicial independence. The idea of judicial independence is both critical to a functioning democracy and also, in some respects, challenging when it comes to the determination of such matters as the remuneration to be paid to judges and other judicial officers.

The principle of judicial independence is rooted in our constitution, and it has been repeatedly reaffirmed in judgments of superior and appellate courts across the country, including the Supreme Court of Canada. In a decision in 1997 the Supreme Court of Canada reaffirmed, established and elaborated some principles around the processes that must be followed for a determination of compensation and matters like salary and benefits for judicial officers — for judges, for judicial justices of the peace.

Those processes include the appointment of compensation commissions and the submission of reports by those commissions. Then there is set out in legislation a carefully structured process that gives the Legislature the opportunity to decide either to accept the recommendations of those commissions or to reject them, and to reject them in whole or in part. There are some requirements that have to be met if the recommendations are to be rejected, and the primary requirement is a consideration of the question of whether the recommendations are unfair or unreasonable.

Responding to reports by judicial compensation commissions imposes an onerous obligation on government. We have to, on the one hand, discharge our fundamental obligation of ensuring that we maintain discipline over public expenditures, that we reflect the important priorities that are established for us as government by the people of British Columbia. But at the same time, we also have to respect the processes that have been established for the determination of judicial compensation issues.

We are trying to discharge that as a government with the two motions that I have put on the orders of the day, one of which we are debating in an amended form now. We have worked long and hard to try to do justice to the issues. The issues are not easy. We have tried to be fair-minded, reasonable and thoughtful about our response to these important reports.

The details of our reasoning in relation to these issues are contained in the response documents that I filed on February 14, when I filed the notices of motion. I won't take a lot of time now; in fact, I won't attempt to improve upon the reasoning set out in those responses. I do want to say something about the Provincial Court of British Columbia and, indeed, about all judicial officers in the province. But since we're talking first here about the Provincial Court, let me say something about that court.

[1445]

I think British Columbians can be rightly proud that we are served by a Provincial Court judiciary that is innovative, that is responsible and that serves the public interest in a very, very important way day by day in the courts of British Columbia to a very, very high standard of excellence.

I know I personally am very proud to have spent the last three and a half years in the role of Attorney General, with the opportunity to deal with the Provincial Court judiciary on the issues where we do have to deal with each other from time to time. The Provincial Court is interested in making sure that the justice system serves the interests of British Columbians. They are open-minded about innovation. They know that what is required and asked of them is that they do justice according to law, and day after day in thousands of cases in courtrooms across the province, that is exactly what our Provincial Court judges do.

They do it under intense public scrutiny. Although the vast majority of the cases that are decided go without much public notice, there are, week after week — and sometimes it feels like night after night, on the nightly news — cases that get an enormous amount of public scrutiny. Unlike almost all the rest of us in society, judges don't have the usual opportunity that we all have as citizens to respond to criticism.

If someone criticizes me for something that I've done in my public capacity or criticizes a citizen for something that they do, you can write a letter to the editor. I can write a letter to the editor; I can stand on the street corner and defend what I've done. I can knock on my neighbour's door and say: "You know, I think you've got it wrong."

We don't let judges do that. Judges speak through judgments that they deliver from the bench. In fact, in the courtrooms of British Columbia judges deliver judgments day after day. They have heard the evidence, they have heard the argument, and they deliver judgment right then and there. They do a great job of doing it. They do it knowing that what they are doing is going to be subject to intense scrutiny.

When I talk about intense scrutiny, I have to say that most of the time the scrutiny is less well-informed than it could be. It's informed by brief media accounts that gloss over a few facts in order to highlight what is sensational about them and ignore the detail which actually informs the reasoning that underlies the decisions that have been made.

I know I've had many experiences where people have expressed concerns to me about decisions as they've understood them from newspaper headlines or from other accounts. Then they have an opportunity to read the decisions, and they realize that judges actually do a pretty darned good job of trying to wend their way through complicated facts, apply complicated law and render justice in cases that are presented before them.

I think that British Columbians are enormously well served by our Provincial Court judiciary. That

doesn't mean for a moment that we can accept the status quo of how our justice system is organized and leave it be. As I say and have said many times, the status quo of how we do things is never anything more than last week's answer to last year's problems. We always need to be engaged in the search for better ways to meet the interests and needs of citizens, and for as long as I have the opportunity to be a part of that search for meaningful access to justice, I will certainly do that. I know that the leadership in the Provincial Court in British Columbia are also fully engaged in that important endeavour.

We also have to make tough decisions about issues of compensation and remuneration. I don't mean to back away from the fact that those are tough decisions. We've tried to strike a balance here in the recommendations that we've brought forward for the consideration of this House. I commend those recommendations for the consideration of the House. I think they strike a balance that is fair and that is reasonable, and I look forward to the comments of other members on the debate of this amended motion.

Motion as amended approved.

J. Bray: I seek leave to make an introduction.

Leave granted.

[1450]

Introductions by Members

J. Bray: I just noticed that joining us in the gallery is someone from my community in Victoria, Garth Yoneda. Garth has been working with underemployed and non-employed Victorians for many years in various programs, including Work Streams and HardHats, that make a real difference in the lives of underemployed Victorians — a great success rate and a great community person. I'd ask that the House please make Garth very welcome.

Hon. G. Plant: I call Motion 75 standing in my name on the orders of the day.

Motions on Notice

JUDICIAL JUSTICES COMPENSATION COMMISSION RECOMMENDATIONS

Hon. G. Plant: I move Motion 75.

[That the Legislative Assembly reject four recommendations of the Report of the Judicial Justices Compensation Committee, September 1, 2004 as laid before this Assembly on October 7, 2004 and again, pursuant to section 6 (1) (c) of the Judicial Compensation Act, on February 9, 2005, for reasons outlined in Response to the 2004 Report of the Judicial Justices Compensation Commission filed in this House February 9, 2005, pursuant to section 6 (2) of the Judicial Compensation Act.

1. The recommended salary increase for January 1, 2005 until March 31, 2005 from \$73,872 to \$75,600 is rejected as unreasonable and unfair. The substitute provision is zero increase for January 1, 2005 - March 31, 2005.
2. The recommended salary for fiscal year 2005/06 of \$75,600 is rejected as unreasonable and unfair. The substitute provision is zero increase for fiscal year 2005/06.
3. The recommendation that a senior Judicial Justice program salary be developed, modelled on the senior judge program for Provincial Court Judges, is rejected as unreasonable and unfair.
4. The recommendation that the Chief Judge have the discretion to approve or disapprove all expenditures of the allowance and guidelines be put in place with respect to the appropriate use of the funds is rejected as unreasonable and unfair. The substitute provision is that effective April 1, 2005, subject to the discretion of the Chief Judge and administered through the office of the Chief Judge, the professional development allowance may be used to reimburse the following expenses incurred by a Judicial Justice for professional development related to the duties of a Judicial Justice:
 - a. Books, periodicals and subscriptions;
 - b. Computer software;
 - c. Internet access fees;
 - d. Professional association membership dues;
 - e. Courses, seminars and conferences including travel and expenses incidental to attendance.

That the Legislative Assembly accept the remaining recommendations contained in the Report of the Judicial Justices Compensation Committee, September 1, 2004.]

I also have an amendment to Motion 75. It is in the following terms:

[I move that Motion 75 standing in my name on the Order Paper be amended by substituting the date "February 14, 2005" for the date "February 9, 2005" wherever it appears in the first paragraph of the said motion.]

On the amendment.

Hon. G. Plant: By way of explanation, the amendment is intended to deal with a clerical mistake in the text of the motion that I filed at the beginning of this week.

May I also say that the province of British Columbia is also very, very well served by the men and women who serve as judicial justices of the peace, and what I said about judges is true of judicial justices. It is equally difficult to deal with these issues of compensation and remuneration, but I hope that the document that I tabled earlier this week, which is the government's response to the report of the Judicial Justices Compensation Commission, will assist members of the public in understanding government's reasoning. I commend it to members in support of the recommendations and the motion that is before the House.

Amendment approved.

Motion as amended approved.

Hon. G. Plant: I call second reading of Bill 4.

Second Reading of Bills

ATTORNEY GENERAL STATUTES AMENDMENT ACT, 2005

Hon. G. Plant: I move the bill be now read a second time.

Bill 4 contains amendments to statutes that are the responsibility of the Attorney General. The intention of these amendments is to provide greater flexibility and efficiency in several areas, and I am particularly happy about one set of amendments that should improve the way in which child support is administered in British Columbia.

These are amendments to the Family Relations Act that will provide statutory authority for establishing a new cost-effective administrative process for recalculating child support amounts on a regular basis based on income changes. Other amendments to the Family Relations Act will allow the child support service, which is referred to in these amendments, to use search powers to locate a payer or a recipient for the purpose of recalculating a child support order.

These changes will allow us to establish a pilot project, and they are intended to save payers and recipients of support the time and money of applying to court to vary child support orders when the payer's income changes. These changes will also reduce the number of court applications to vary child support based solely on a change in the payer's income.

Children will benefit from an increase in child support when the payer's income increases, and payers whose income decreases or is reduced will benefit from child support orders that more accurately reflect their ability to pay. Administering these changes more effectively without the need to go to court to get a variation in every case should reduce the number of child support orders that fall into arrears and then need to be enforced.

[1455]

I want to say that it is important to keep two things in mind. First, this is a purely administrative process. There will be no exercise of judicial discretion involved. Secondly, it only deals with changes in income.

It really is tied very closely to the way the child support guidelines operate. The child support guidelines help identify the amounts of support that have to be paid, based on levels of income. The point of the administrative process contemplated here is that if all that's happened is someone's income has gone up, all that should be required is to go to the requisite section of the child support guidelines and determine what the new amount of child support should be at that level of income. If it's as simple as that, then the administrative process will allow the new level of support to be implemented without the need to go to court and make a full application to vary support levels.

Conversely, if a payer's income falls, then the payer should be able to reduce the amount of support that is required to be paid, by reference to the child support guidelines. There will also be the implementation of

those changes without the need to go to court. For any other changes, where an exercise of judicial discretion is needed, parents will still be able to apply to court to vary their child support orders as they do now. The details of the operation of the scheme will be set out in regulations to the act.

Bill 4 also amends the Legal Services Society Act to allow the Legal Services Society to include in an upcoming year's budget any accumulated surplus available from a previous year. The intention here is not to allow the society to accumulate a deficit, but rather to ensure that the society can realize the benefit of careful financial management by improving the level of service they can provide.

It will also allow the society to realize the benefit of any revenue-generating activities they might undertake. The legislated requirement that the Legal Services Society budget be approved by the Attorney General is unchanged. However, the amendments also will require the society to prepare a budget when so directed by the Attorney General. Currently, the society is required to present a budget by November 21 each year. The amendment will allow the society to synchronize its budget process with that of government.

This year we saw the challenge of the current operating system, as the society was required to submit a budget in circumstances where they knew they had made some requests around increases in family law programs. They knew we were working hard to see if we could get a budget increase in the area of support for family law. Of course, as we now know from the budget documents tabled yesterday, there will be an increase. But the statutory requirement and the time line associated with it are out of sync, really, with the time lines in our budget processes, which are also mandated by legislation. The purpose of this amendment is to try to ensure that those things can operate together more effectively.

They do not lower the level of accountability that the Legal Services Society has to government. The amendments will accord the society greater flexibility in its budget process and ensure its budget process is aligned with that of government.

Bill 4 also amends the Offence Act to enable fines to be prescribed for violation tickets without requiring prior consultation with the Chief Judge of the Provincial Court. The office of the Chief Judge supports this amendment. The current requirement for the Attorney General to consult with the Chief Judge prior to amending violation ticket fine amounts is an administrative burden for both the office of the Chief Judge and the provincial government. There are over 350 separate fine amounts for violations of the Motor Vehicle Act and motor vehicle regulations and a similar number for the other statutes for which violation tickets may be issued under the Offence Act.

When the federal Contraventions Act comes into force in British Columbia later in 2005, the total number of separate fine amounts will increase to over 2,500. A similar requirement from municipalities to consult with the Chief Judge before establishing fines for mu-

nicipal bylaw violations was removed with the introduction of provisions of the new Community Charter in January 2004. The amendments before the House in this bill are intended to complete the process that was initiated by those changes to the Community Charter.

[1500]

Finally, Bill 4 amends the Provincial Court Act to make permanent the highly successful senior judges part-time program. This program, which permits senior judges to elect to sit part-time, assists in retaining senior jurists who might otherwise retire fully. The program was implemented as a pilot project following the 2001 judicial compensation process, with a sunset clause of March 31, 2005. Following a review of the program last year, government and the judiciary made a joint submission to the 2004 Judges Compensation Commission that the program be made permanent.

Motion approved.

Hon. G. Plant: I move that the bill be referred to a Committee of the Whole House to be considered at the next sitting of the House after today.

Bill 4, Attorney General Statutes Amendment Act, 2005, read a second time and referred to a Committee of the Whole House for consideration at the next sitting of the House after today.

Tabling Documents

Hon. C. Hansen: I rise to table a document pursuant to the budget papers from yesterday. It's titled *British Columbia Government Strategic Plan 2005/06-2007/08*.

Hon. G. Plant: I call second reading of Bill 3.

Second Reading of Bills

MISCELLANEOUS STATUTES AMENDMENT ACT, 2005

Hon. G. Plant: I move that the bill be now read a second time.

Bill 3 amends various statutes to clarify provisions, correct inadvertent errors and make a number of minor housekeeping amendments. Firstly, there is a retroactive amendment to the Crime Victim Assistance Act. That will ensure that those who are criminally injured during the course of their employment will have the same access to financial assistance and benefits as others who are affected by violent crime.

Secondly, a minor housekeeping amendment to the Expropriation Amendment Act, 2004, will allow regulations to be made for transition purposes to permit the effective transfer of the Expropriation Compensation Board's jurisdiction to the courts. This will provide greater flexibility and certainty, and it will help us ensure the timely windup of the Expropriation Compensation Board.

[J. Weisbeck in the chair.]

Bill 3 also extends the transition period between the Forest Practices Code of British Columbia Act and the new Forest and Range Practices Act to provide industry with the anticipated two-year transition period. The intent of the extension, which is fully endorsed by licensees, is to provide for a smooth transition, which is essential for the competitive operating of our licensees and the workers and communities that depend on British Columbia's number one industry.

Minor amendments are also required to correct a cross-referencing error in the Land Title Act. Additional amendments will also provide clarity and harmonize the language with the new Transportation Investment Act.

The amendments to the Motor Vehicle Act and the Motor Vehicle Amendment Act, 2004, show that the province is committed to enhancing public safety. Specifically, the amendment to the Motor Vehicle Act provides flexibility to increase seatbelt fines to encourage British Columbians to continue to belt up. Additionally, a drafting error in an unproclaimed section of the Motor Vehicle Amendment Act, 2004, will be corrected to reinstate the mandatory jail sentence for driving while prohibited for second and subsequent offences. The amendments also increase the minimum fine to \$500 for second and subsequent offences of driving while prohibited or suspended, while maintaining the mandatory 14 days in jail.

In addition, Bill 3 adds a section to the Municipalities Enabling and Validating Act (No. 3) to remedy a procedural oversight made by the city of Nanaimo in seeking elector approval of a proposed borrowing by-law for the new Nanaimo centre development.

The proposed amendment to the Park Act is a housekeeping amendment to correct the referencing error made when Bill 16, the Water, Land, and Air Protection Statutes Amendment Act, 2004, amended the Park Act in the spring of 2004.

Bill 3 also corrects an inadvertent drafting omission to the Property Transfer Tax Act that restores the list of specific criteria that must be met for an exemption from tax to be available with respect to the transfer of the property to a trustee.

[1505]

Bill 3 amends the Referendum Act to clarify that the Lieutenant-Governor-in-Council may make regulations that apply sections of the Election Act to a referendum with any necessary adaptations. Those provisions will assist cabinet as regulations are made to ensure the smooth operation of the electoral reform referendum that will be a part of the election day in May of 2005.

Lastly, the amendment to part 2 of the Small Business Venture Capital Act will ensure that program investors can only offer goods and services to registered small businesses if they can demonstrate that the transaction equates fair market value. This amendment is necessary to ensure that program capital invested under the act is not subject to misuse.

Motion approved.

Hon. G. Plant: I move that the bill be referred to a Committee of the Whole House to be considered at the next sitting of the House after today.

Bill 3, Miscellaneous Statutes Amendment Act, 2005, read a second time and referred to a Committee of the Whole House for consideration at the next sitting of the House after today.

Hon. G. Bruce: I call response to the budget.

Budget Debate

(continued)

J. MacPhail: Yesterday I said the best word to describe this election budget was "cynical" — cynical because it's not credible; cynical because it's part of a plan to give the Premier an extreme makeover 90 days before an election following four years of extreme policies; cynical because, as I said yesterday, it is not believable to speak the language of the hard conservative Right — the government-is-the-enemy language of deregulation, trickle-down tax cuts, restraint, pain — with apparent sincerity for four years and then to abandon it so completely in only a few weeks.

But cynical really doesn't even begin to describe what this government has done. Now we know that this government doesn't even plan to put its budget before the House for debate. The Minister of Finance says he doesn't think he has the moral authority to allow this budget to be debated. Well, perhaps the Premier could have told us that when he was taking such great pride in his fixed election date legislation. Perhaps the Premier could have told British Columbians that when he set the budget date and took such great pride in it, what he really meant was: "You're going to get a budget, British Columbians, and we're not going to let you have one iota of say or question about it." Perhaps he should have come clean when he and his government caucus passed that legislation.

This is a budget that contains a quarter of a billion dollars in a pre-election slush fund. It's a budget that provides nothing for long-term care beds. It's a budget that tries to rewrite the history of the last four years — four years of record deficits, broken promises, higher taxes, higher fees, longer surgical wait-lists, failed privatization schemes, and a more polarized and divided province than ever. No wonder this government wants to hide from debating this budget.

The government insists that it doesn't have time to debate the budget in full, that there's no possible way we can get through the budget before the election is called. How insulting. Does the government honestly believe that two months is not enough time to debate the budget? Of course they don't. They want to deny British Columbians the right to have this budget debated, because they don't want their election promises

held up to scrutiny. They don't want to have to answer for their flip-flops and their broken promises. They don't want the public to have the chance to lift the hood on this budget and discover more waste, mismanagement and broken promises. All they want to do is hit the campaign trail, give more broken promises and start spending the money in the secret slush fund.

[1510]

It's no wonder they're scared, Mr. Speaker. Every time the veil is lifted on their budgets, the litany of broken promises and failed schemes grows and the Premier's credibility gap with the public widens.

Just take a look at some of the issues we've explored in the line-by-line budget debate. Here are some of the issues in past line-by-line budget debates that we've explored. And now there will be no debate — muzzled and shut down by this government. Here's what we've explored in the budget debate process: a B.C. Rail 990-year lease. Let me see. In a 2001 promise the current Premier said: "We will not sell B.C. Rail." What they did was lease it for a pittance for 990 years. Who do they think they're fooling?

We explored the issue of patronage. Why was Andrew Wilkinson, the president of the B.C. Liberal Party, hired for \$200,000 per year of taxpayer money in a portfolio for which he didn't have an iota of experience? In fact, on the first day on the job, his picture was still up on the B.C. Liberal Party website as the president of the B.C. Liberal Party. And that's not patronage?

I guess the government doesn't want us to ask questions about Prem Vinning being hired by the Premier's office. That's why they don't want any debate on the estimates. Hello, Prem Vinning. We have questions to ask about that.

Interjection.

J. MacPhail: Peter. I'm sorry. Peter.

We explored over and over again in last year's estimates the disappearing long-term care beds. We explored the Premier's wildly overbudget pet Web portal project. We explored the public affairs bureau — budget increases to pay for partisan, pro-government advertising. We explored the Minister of Agriculture, Food and Fisheries' fish farm fiasco. We asked him questions over and over again about why he tipped off Stolt Sea Farms that they were going to be fined. We explored why this government returned money from legitimate penalties imposed and fines collected on fish farms to those very same fish farms.

We know why the government doesn't want to debate some of these issues. We see today that the long-term care bed commitment that they made in the 2001 election for 5,000 additional beds has been officially ditched, officially abandoned. No wonder they don't want to open themselves up to questions.

The Minister of Finance says that there will be six days of debate on the budget. I can hardly wait for a Liberal MLA to stand up and address, in their budget debate remarks, Mr. Premier, why you abandoned the

long-term care bed commitment that you made. I can hardly wait.

[1515]

I can hardly wait for a Liberal government caucus member to stand up and say: "Why did you return that fine money to the fish farms?" I can hardly wait for a Liberal government caucus member to stand up and say to the Minister of Water, Land and Air Protection: "Gee, you cut hundreds of conservation officers over the last three years, and you're hiring back less than half of them. Why will that be any good?"

We examined, in the line-by-line budget debate last year, the Doug Walls scandal and the mismanagement of the Ministry of Children and Family Development restructuring. My colleague from Vancouver–Mount Pleasant uncovered all sorts of information that had not been revealed to the public about how tens of millions of dollars had been wasted on a failed restructuring plan in the community living sector — how children were going without, how parents were going without because this government blew over \$25 million on a failed community living sector restructuring plan.

In the budget debate last year we finally got the Solicitor General to acknowledge that this government had broken their promise and had expanded gambling. We finally got him to admit to that, and yet they still try to spin their way out, saying that half a billion dollars in extra revenue from gaming isn't expanded gambling. Well, there are about 70-odd Liberal MLAs who are the only ones in British Columbia who believe that this government didn't expand gambling. Virtually every other British Columbian knows that this government broke its election promise to not expand gaming.

In the line-by-line budget debate we shone the light on how the B.C. Liberals were diverting federal funds meant for child care into their health budget. No one else did that. That was revealed in this chamber.

There are so many issues that, but for the opposition grilling of this government, would never have seen the light of day, because the Liberal government caucus members don't do their job for a minute, let alone a day or a week, and represent their constituents in this chamber. They represent one person in this chamber, and that's the Premier. That's the only person they represent. They abandon their constituents day after day after day.

On the matter of pay equity my colleague the member for Vancouver–Mount Pleasant grilled the then Minister of State for Women's Equality on what their plan was for pay equity. This government destroyed pay equity legislation but said they were going to replace it with something. They've done nothing, absolutely nothing.

My colleague grilled this government day after day after day on the cuts to women's centres and transition houses, and this government did nothing until yesterday, when they had a deathbed repentance and are now funding transition houses. How many women have been harmed and abused in the meantime? How many children have been harmed because of domestic violence?

The opposition revealed the government's end to mandatory charging for spousal abuse. Yet this government thinks they can put a little bit of money back to victims and restore money for family legal aid in the dying days of their government, and they think British Columbians will just accept that.

[1520]

It was the opposition, the New Democratic opposition, who shone the light on the most cruel and unnecessary and anxious-making review of people's rights and benefits ever seen in this province, and that's the disability review. It was the New Democrat opposition that shone the light on that cruel and completely unnecessary review — \$5 million of taxpayer money to grill and humiliate people with disabilities, only to find that there was no problem.

It was the New Democrat opposition that shone the light on the cuts to inner-city school funding that this government imposed. It was only because of that hard work with the communities, the families, the parents, that the funding was restored.

Well, Mr. Speaker, there are so many incidents where holding this government to account forced this government to back down on their draconian cuts — forced them to back down and reverse their draconian cuts. No wonder they don't want a debate. Day after day we asked the Premier about the way he does requests for proposals and how ridiculous that process is. Day after day we debated the off-loading of provincial costs onto the municipalities in the estimates debate, the budget debate. No wonder they don't want a real budget debate.

In this year's estimates, in order for the opposition to do its job on behalf of British Columbians, we need to be able to examine ministry budgets. Why? We need to ensure, on behalf of British Columbians, that there's not continued contract mismanagement and scandal in the troubled Ministry of Children and Family Development restructuring process. We need to find out why the treaty negotiations office is taking a budgetary hit when there's been next to no progress on treaties.

We need to examine the reasons for delays in getting the B.C. integrated gang task force up and running. This government made great promises on fighting organized crime. Of course, they had to do that just moments after their own Legislature offices, their own Minister of Finance's offices, were raided by the cops. Oh, yeah. A raid on the Legislature related to drugs and money laundering, and they announced an organized crime task force. Well, what's the delay? It's not happening. In fact, Dave Basi and Bob Virk and Aneal Basi have been charged with criminal activity. The activity's still there. The reason for the organized gang crime task force is still there.

The Minister of Finance's office had people working in it who are now charged with some very serious crimes. Yet we don't see any integrated gang task force. We don't see any congress on organized crime.

We need to shine a light on immigrant settlement funding. We need to understand why this government has attacked immigrants and refugees by slashing their

funding. I can't tell from the budget. I can't tell what happened. We've talked to the community. They don't know what happened. They have no idea what's going on. And that's after the budget documents were tabled.

Settlement funding for immigrants is completely unclear. It's in confusion. It's in chaos. People are being harmed by it. We need to ask questions about that.

[1525]

We need to shine a light on the government's ongoing efforts to privatize ICBC now that they've removed Nick Geer and installed Paul Taylor as the CEO of ICBC.

We won't be able to ask questions about the hiring of Prem Vinning and what the heck he was going to do for the government other than try to buy votes. I mean get votes, Mr. Speaker. My apologies. Where was that money coming from? Where was the posting for Prem Vinning? How much was he going to be paid? What was his expertise?

What is the plan for increasing trade with China and South Asia? What's your plan, government? There's nothing in the documents that explains it, except for spin.

We need to be able to ask questions about the Richmond-Airport-Vancouver rapid transit line, the budget for that and how that's going to work, given the fact that the community is up in arms now that the government, because they've got a public-private partnership agreement, won't be able to tunnel down Cambie Street but are going to have to do a cut-and-cover — rip it up and destroy small business along Cambie Street — in order to build the Richmond-Airport-Vancouver line. And this government claims they're big friends of small business people. Let's go to the Cambie Street small business people and ask them how much they like this government.

We need to know whether the government's going to use Bill 75, the most draconian piece of legislation I've seen in years. What is it called? It's the project streamlining act — where they can shove their own interests down the throats of municipal governments, even if municipal governments say no. Are they going to use Bill 75 to build the Richmond-Airport-Vancouver rapid transit line down Cambie, even against the community's wishes?

We won't be able to examine the government's failed Web portal. You know that project, the Premier's pet project. We in the opposition call it the digital dumpster. Open it up, shove a bunch of money in there, and see it disappear.

We won't be able to examine the exploding surgical wait-lists and this government's failed health privatization scheme.

We won't be able to examine the complete failure of this government's apprenticeship program, just at the very time in this new, young century when British Columbia needs the strongest apprenticeship training program ever. No. We won't be able to ask any questions.

We won't be able to find out why the government's putting a measly \$40 million back in peoples' pockets

in reduced medical services premiums when they took \$400 million out of people's pockets in increased medical services premiums. We won't be able to ask that question, will we, Mr. Speaker?

We won't be able to examine the government's privatization schemes, which have threatened our privacy.

We won't be able to examine the government's partisan political advertising budgets, and I'll tell you that I have dozens of questions on that, based on the new Liberal Party ad, given the huge similarity — one might say almost identical nature — of the Liberal Party ads compared to the government ads that were bought with our taxpayer money. Oh, but we won't be able to ask those questions.

[1530]

The executive director of the B.C. division of the Canadian Mental Health Association, Bev Gutray, said just yesterday: "It isn't clear from the budget document exactly how much money will be allocated to help treat mental illness." That was yesterday. Oh, do you think we might have some questions about that?

Here's what she says: "Although the budget provides a lot of money for health, we're not sure how that will translate into the treatment of mental health." We won't be able to help her get those answers. We won't be able to ask questions about the government's inadequate pine beetle strategy to protect vulnerable communities. We won't be able to ask questions on why they abandoned their heartlands strategy and abandoned those communities at the same time.

Who is going to examine the shortage of conservation officers that continues to exist and this government's halfhearted response to threats to our environment, including this government's failure on Kyoto? Who's going to ask those questions, if not for the New Democrat opposition? Who's going to ask questions about the pain that this government has caused in communities when they destroyed the social contract in forestry that said: "Yes, forest companies, have British Columbia's trees. Make a good living, make a profit, but share the value of that public resource with the communities from which you take those trees"? That was the social contract that this government ripped up, destroyed. Who's going to ask questions about the ill effects of that action?

This government has allocated \$291 million to the Gateway Project. Now, that includes doubling the capacity of the Port Mann Bridge and Highway 1. There has been little — okay, how about no — public consultation on this project. I'm sure they talked amongst themselves. "Hey, give me some money so I can win in my riding," says the Minister of Transportation. But any public consultation? Not one. There's been little or no study. In fact, there has not been one study demonstrating in a transparent and accountable way that the benefits of this project outweigh its cost.

There has been no public disclosure of a workable plan. Oh, we're all in favour. The New Democrats are all in favour of opening up the economic corridor for transportation. We want to make that corridor work.

But this government has no plan — absolutely none — for how that's going to work. For all we know, what they're going to do with the Port Mann Bridge could make Surrey worse off, not better off.

The member for Surrey–Panorama Ridge wants to represent his constituents. He wants to open up the economic corridor and fix the Port Mann Bridge in a way that works — doesn't just pass the buck and harm other communities, but works. We'd like to ask the government questions about that. The member for Surrey–Panorama Ridge has a dozen questions on that, and he won't be allowed to ask one — not one.

[1535]

With the government spending \$291 million on the Gateway Project, don't you think the citizens of British Columbia deserve an answer about feasibility, cost and timing of the projects? We need to ask why it took the Premier 24 hours to break his promise on accountability. We need to ask the Premier why he wasn't straight with British Columbians when he said: "Openness beats hiddenness." We need to ask him why it took six days to break his promise from the throne speech on delivering 5,000 additional long-term care beds. And we need to ask dozens of questions about the secret slush fund of \$236 million — their pre-election slush fund that there are now no details on whatsoever.

We need to find out why they're spending so much money on having open cabinet meetings. I don't know. Is it a dress rehearsal for politician wannabes? Is it kind of like it's the only opportunity for the cabinet actually to get experience because, really, half of them have nothing to do — absolutely nothing to do?

There is no excuse — no excuse that actually honours democracy in this province, no excuse that recognizes that we have a British parliamentary system for a reason. There's no excuse for the arrogance of the massive majority that this government uses as a weapon against the public every single day.

Last year the opposition had 27 days of line-by-line debate on the budget. There were two of us. We asked concise, thoughtful, cohesive, relevant, direct questions, and that took 27 days. There are more than 27 days of sitting before April 15, so I don't know what the Minister of Finance or the Government House Leader is talking about — that we've never, ever got estimates done before mid-April. That isn't because of estimates. That isn't because of the time we took to debate estimates; it's because the government put through 50 pieces of legislation at the same time.

They've got no legislative agenda. They've got no legislative agenda, because all they want to do is run, hide and try to make British Columbians believe their pre-election cynical budget document, without anybody having the opportunity to ask any questions or holding it up to any scrutiny. It was this government, when in opposition, that railed against the previous administration for not debating the budget, and now they use that as the example to justify their actions. The shameful hypocrisy by this government is now unmatched.

One of the great lessons that my colleague and I have learned about the British parliamentary system is

the value of opposition in a representative democracy. My colleague from Vancouver–Mount Pleasant was in government for five years; I was in government for nine and a half years. Neither of us had been in opposition prior to that. Over the course of the last three and a half years we have both come to understand the very valuable role that the opposition plays in holding a government to account.

[1540]

The Liberal Party was very effective in carrying out that role when they were in opposition. I know they thought they were in opposition far too long, but they were effective. We know that. We know from our own experience now that there is just as valuable a role in the opposition's work in a British parliamentary system as the government's role. In fact, a government who rules by fiat can never, ever do the citizens of the province well. This government will be ruling by fiat. Shame on them.

V. Anderson: It's a privilege to rise and respond to the budget presentation and discussion, which the Leader of the Opposition has been discussing without actually dealing with any of the realities of the actual budget that's been presented at this particular time.

I had the privilege of being in the opposition that the now Leader of the Opposition talked about today and of having the opportunity to interact with them on a positive basis, discussing with them and working with them to make the best combined operation we could — by all the members of the Legislative Assembly — for the effective government of the province.

Today, though, I'd like to respond in a different way than I've been able to respond to budgets in the past. In the 13-some years that I've been here in the Legislature, one of my concerns in undertaking a response to the budget was that each and every one of those budgets was, in my opinion, lacking in concern for the everyday life of the citizens of British Columbia — particularly in the area of people concerns, particularly in the area of the needs of the average citizen that the government had taken over, historically, from the community. I'd like to go back a little bit and give a context in which I speak.

I was born in 1929. I lived in the midst of the Depression. One of the realities then was that there were no social service programs available to the people of the community. There were no opportunities to go to anyone else except your neighbours, and neighbours were very helpful to each other. Neighbours were very helpful to the transients who came through the province and who rode on the railcars from one part of the country to another.

Most of the social programs — the health programs, the educational programs — were undertaken in large part by the religious community, bringing together the people of the community so that they would understand what they were about.

I would like to have the opportunity today to highlight what we have put forward in this coming year. I would like to have the opportunity to say to our com-

munity at large that things are different in this particular budget. They are different because, in a unique way, this budget has taken on a responsibility to respond to the issues that have been brought forward to us from the community and are of concern to their everyday community living.

[1545]

It's interesting that in the goals set forth in both the throne speech and the budget, three of the five goals — in fact, the first three of the five goals — have to do with the everyday life of our community people — their well-being, their personal interactions, their family and community lifestyle.

The first of these was to make B.C. the best-educated, most literate jurisdiction on the continent. It's an education plan that begins at birth and continues for the whole of one's life. Early development education is a key opportunity which is brought forth in this budget in a very new way — to develop in every community across this province, with the same concern that we do in public and high school education, an opportunity for young children to get the best possible start in life, to become learners with community support from the very earliest opportunity in their community and to help and support parents and community members to be learners and teachers with the youngest members of our society.

Perhaps this is something that we have learned from our aboriginal community, because it has been their tradition throughout generations that the youngest members of society should learn from the elders in every aspect of their life. It is our opportunity to enable our young people to have that kind of head start so that when they come to the years of public and high school, they have the background and a personal ability to undertake that process.

The second of those goals is to lead the way in North America in healthy living and physical fitness — again to stress that from the very beginning of life, there is the opportunity for our young people to have the healthiest, most active possible opportunities in an urban setting.

I grew up in a rural setting, and in that rural setting and even in the urban setting in days gone by there were lots of opportunities for physical activity. We did not have cars to travel with. We did not have theatres to go to in the same place. We did not have television to watch during the day. We did not have computers to sit in front of. Indeed, we didn't have televisions to watch the National Hockey League. The best we could do was listen to it on Saturday night on the radio.

Interjection.

V. Anderson: My comrade here wants to know what the National Hockey League is. Well, there was an announcement today, but I haven't heard what it is yet.

These were opportunities that we had, and now we need to plan, within our educational and health system, opportunities for our young people and adults to

become physically active and have the opportunity for a full life.

The third of those opportunities or goals is to build the best system of support in Canada for persons with disabilities, those with special needs, children at risk and seniors — opportunities to put a priority on those who have special opportunities and special challenges in their lives and to give them the concern and the priority they need.

[1550]

It's interesting that the focus on early child development as a universal concept which builds into its plan the opportunity to assess every single young member of our society as to their physical ability, their mental ability and, where it is needed, to discover if they have difficulties in hearing, in eyesight or in other parts of their medical being.... So they become, from the very beginning, wholesome and healthy young people — to approach this from an educational point of view, to approach it from a health point of view, to approach it from the unique characteristics of each one of them so that they may discover it in their families and find the support they need for their own unique opportunities in life.

It's interesting that when you put these three categories together in our budget presentation and you add to it the related ministry of community, aboriginal and community development — which, again, is there for the support of all of our people within the community.... Of a \$32 billion budget, \$22 billion is covered by these three categories. Two-thirds of our budget, contrary to the understanding of many people, is devoted to the personal, physical, mental and social health and well-being of our citizens.

Apart from that, the overall goal that is presented in the budget is sound fiscal management for a sustainable future. In that other third of the budget is the opportunity to support our business communities, our mining, our forestry and our small businesses, which provide the jobs, the livelihood and the experience for our communities, our citizens and our adults to be able to care for themselves, their families and their children.

It's unique for me in the 13 years that I've been here in the Legislature to discover a budget two-thirds of which is devoted to the well-being — health-wise, education-wise and social community-wise — of our community people. I want to commend our government for that undertaking, and I want to commend them for the way in which they have begun, more each and every day, to meet with and listen to the people of the province, even as we did today here in the Legislature with groups that came to share with us what they were accomplishing and how we could work together with them for common community service.

One of the things that came out of all of those meetings with community groups and that came out again with today's community group was that in the past they felt, in their attempt to work with government, that the stovepipe nature of government — where each ministry operated independently of the others — was a drawback to their interaction with the government.

They asked, and rightly so, that there should be more interactive opportunities with government and amongst the ministries of government in order that there be an integrated approach to the community.

That's exactly what this budget brings forth: the interactive approach of the ministries concerned with various aspects of the population — the Ministries of Health, Education, Human Resources and Children and Family Development — focusing on the needs of early development in preschool boys and girls, focusing together in education to raise the implications of the health needs, environmental needs, social needs and financial needs of those who are in our educational system at all levels.

This new pattern of interactive ministries is fundamentally important to the promises that were in the throne speech and in the budget. It's one thing to focus on the amounts which are made available in the budget, which are intriguing and interesting in themselves, but even more important is what happens to those. Is there a plan for coordinating amongst the ministries of government how those plans are put into practice within the community?

[1555]

One of the realities that I've mentioned here before which I think is extremely important is the working of government with the partnership of community agencies that are a part of our lifestyle. This is a new problem within our community, a new opportunity, and our government has taken the stand of working with community agencies so that we can work with them in partnership. In order for that to be effective, what has come across very clearly is that communities and community groups must be able to work in partnership with each other. Partly because of the way government has operated, each of the community groups has come independently to government with programs for their community which are separate and apart from programs of other groups operating in that community. There has been dissatisfaction in everybody's mind because of that approach.

If we have, as was developed in the Healthy Communities project — which is now being reorganized and brought back, I trust, into our communities — the opportunity for community groups to come together with each other in their own community, to develop a community plan and to say what part of that community plan each of them will undertake in cooperation with the others, then when we are supporting community programs, we can go and share in a partnership in that community plan. There will not then be the dissatisfaction or the counter-opportunity between them that we've had in the past.

I want to say to the citizens of the community that there is an opportunity we have not had before for community groups with common interests to come together and develop a community plan to say how those groups will work with each other and to come collectively to the government and say: "This is what we need in our community."

That's part of the plan in regional health — to bring health closer to the community so that the community

can come to their regional health.... That's part of the plan in education — to bring it home to the region so that they can do that. It's part of the plan in children and family development — to bring it home to community care, for individual care to develop within the community, where the community's citizens are making their own plans and their own opportunities and the government is moving in to work with them and to plan to help them.

I want to say, from my point of view, that after 13 years I'm pleased and delighted at the new approach that is coming in government in British Columbia through this throne speech and this budget speech. I'm curious about the questions that the Leader of the Opposition had, full of questions but no answers. We need answers and new opportunities, and I'm pleased that in this budget we have an opportunity to say to the community: "Come together. Work with each other so that we can work with you as a government for the well-being and the prosperity of B.C."

Jobs are created in communities. Families live in communities. Children grow up in communities. The needs of people can be met in their home communities. New opportunities of mental health are being provided in the home community. Let's look to our community, develop plans and a vision within those communities and share that vision with the government so that they can respond and coordinate community concerns across the province.

Thank you, hon. Speaker, for this opportunity.

[1600]

D. Jarvis: I rise once again to talk on the budget speech. I have to commend the previous speaker, my friend Val Anderson, who is retiring. He brings out a different discussion whenever we're talking about throne speeches or budget speeches or bills. He certainly always gives us some sage advice, and we should all listen to him more often.

First of all, I want to do a correction or an apology back to last week when I did my throne speech, in which I said — I think I said — that it was my twenty-fourth throne speech, which raised a lot of questions and eyebrows in here. I'm not really that old, but I got it mixed up. Both the budget and the throne speech were about 24. At this point here, I'm now heading into my thirteenth or fourteenth budget speech, so we'll see what happens when it comes out about it.

Also, before I get into the speech, I want to thank my constituents in North Vancouver-Seymour for bearing with me all these years since 1991. They have given me marvellous support, and I truly appreciate it. I also want to say that it is a great thing to be an MLA, as you all know. This House was first opened 134 years ago in 1871. I bet you all knew that. Since that time, 134 years....

J. Bray: You were here then, weren't you?

D. Jarvis: No, I wasn't here then, but I was right around the corner.

There have been millions of people through this province. We now have a population of around four million, but there have only been 831 MLAs in 134 years. The point is that, as MLAs, we have got to appreciate the honour our constituents have given to us.

This Budget 2005-06 is what I think you'd call a defining moment in B.C., as a result of the balanced budget legislation we put forward several years ago. Much is being made of the surplus — the budget that we have — and not just because we had made a promise to do so, but it signifies that we are now back in business and that the economy is going to once again be healthy in this province.

We can now start to meet the needs of all British Columbians, be they social or fiscal. The real purpose of a balanced budget is that we will also see a surplus — and yes, for years to come. No fudge-it budgets. As you know, the accounting is now done under the GAAP, which are the generally accepted accounting principles.

For those who don't recall balanced budget law, the Balanced Budget and Ministerial Accountability Act was put forward to this Legislature in our first session when we became government in 2001. The bill in essence stated that the government was not to have a deficit after the 2004-05 year. So on February 17, 2004, it was mandatory that B.C. have its first balanced budget under that act. This is what we have now in '05-06 — a balanced budget, and it will remain balanced for years to come — no more deficit financing in the province.

Mr. Speaker, for your own interest, over the last three years balanced budgeting has resulted for the first time in decades because the spending by the ministries themselves has actually been done within their own personal budgets. The ministries in 2001 were required to operate within their budgets or be faced with the penalties out of their own pockets. Now that is what you may call an incentive — incentive management — but nevertheless it was part of the restructuring program that was put forward.

As in the past, if you overspent your ministerial budget, who cared? You just.... Hence they weren't required to balance even their own ministry books, and such was the case that we kept spending more than what we had and getting into the negative position. The respective ministries, as I said, did just that. This is one of the reasons that we see the balanced budget today.

[1605]

Like your own household expenses, if you don't watch how you spend your income, you will always spend more than you have, and you will be bankrupt soon. That is what was happening in this province. This tough stance that was taken by the management of this government is why we see balanced budgets today and a big surplus for this year. The budget does emphasize that the major spending over these next years will go to improving health care, education and a reduction of taxes and causes for those that actually need it the most.

It has been related before that over the past three years B.C. has created more jobs in Canada than any other province. Over 202,000 new jobs were created in the last three years. To be politically correct, I guess I would have to say that approximately 5,900 of them were part-time jobs. Therefore, full-time jobs actually did exceed over 197,000. Nevertheless, it was a very positive result.

This steady performance is indicating steady growth in British Columbia. We have to be thankful for this, because we've had a decade of an unknowing financial position as to where we were going. We went from the number one spot down to the number ten spot.

The government, in its restructuring program, realized that there was a lot of uncertainty out there. When you consider the softwood lumber problems, the land use claims, the 9/11 disaster, SARS, BSE, even the fires in the Okanagan and the aboriginal concerns, there were a lot of things in question. One of our main thrusts when we got elected was to restructure this province and the way it was run and concentrate on getting the economy moving over the next few years, which have now come upon us.

For example, in mining, it's improving and will improve even more. We have great optimism here in British Columbia about it.

Interjection.

D. Jarvis: That voice we heard in the background was the minister looking after mining.

All you have to do is look at the financial pages to see that the metal prices are up. Copper is over \$1.40 now. Gold is at \$4.25 plus per ounce. Nickel is over \$6 a pound. Exploration is exploding for the first time since the early nineties.

Claim-staking has risen and probably is.... I thought I read somewhere that it was a little over 400 percent from where it was a short while ago.

Drilling programs are climbing as the new companies are taking advantage of the rising metal prices, along with — I might add — what our government has done in a proactive action with respect to the credits for investing. We're now seeing.... I think there are 12 new mines waiting to be approved before they come on stream.

Hon. P. Bell: Thirteen.

D. Jarvis: Thirteen mines. We're doing even better than I thought.

Hon. P. Bell: A new one every day.

D. Jarvis: Every day there's a new one for sure.

The government's philosophy was to help mining as we made changes to their regulatory burdens and taxes to encourage investments. We saw a better 2004, and we are now going to see a better 2005, '06, '07 and on into the next decade. Mining has, once again, become a major revenue producer for British Columbia.

Once again, we see growth in our resource communities. That is part of our goal. This government, by streamlining regulations to encourage investment and by the lowering of tax burdens to spur on economic development, has made our resource areas grow once again. No longer do we see our young people and men and women leaving for better pastures in other provinces.

Energy also has now eclipsed forestry as one of our largest revenue generators. Energy is now.... I think over \$1.5 billion in revenue was brought in last year. The potential is that there is no end in sight.

[1610]

With the prospect of offshore drilling for gas and oil, there is a potential in the Bowser and Nechako basins and in offshore drilling. The prospect will be an additional bonanza for British Columbia and, down the road, for our children.

We also have growth in our tourism due to our natural beauty, naturally. Every business is on the threshold of real recovery, including, for example — which I've mentioned many times — the film industry, which holds a link with tourism.

On the North Shore, where my riding is located, we have a thriving film industry, as you know, that has become a global one. It is located in the North Vancouver-Seymour, North Vancouver-Lonsdale and West Vancouver-Capilano ridings. We have somewhere around 6,000 people, plus or minus, that have employment in the film industry.

Now, these people, as I say, make their living in this industry, and a taxable income of well in excess of \$92 million comes into this province. That is something we can't turn away. These numbers do not even take into consideration the number of service companies in the private sector that rely on the film industry and supply the film industry. They estimate that there are approximately 30,000 people in the lower mainland who derive their income from the film industry. It's truly a boon to my constituents and the provincial government.

This industry is a very competitive business, and there's always a danger of losing considerable advantage due to taxation and things like that. This government came in to help when the governments of Quebec and Ontario tried to pirate the industry out of British Columbia. I thank the government for doing that.

Mr. Speaker, as you go through the budget speech, you can see why it was necessary to put our economic house in order so that we could continue and enhance our social agenda and ensure that we could provide and sustain the programs that are necessary. From the start in 2001 we said that the economics would come first, as our economy was in a state of decay and was languishing from almost two decades of spending without concern as to where that money was coming from.

The previous government borrowed without concern for the taxpayers of the future, our children and grandchildren. As the bureaucracy grew more and more, servicing of our debt grew and grew until finally

it was necessary to get a more realistic view or assessment as to what it was costing this province. That is why we came forward with that plan to restructure this province. At one point our debt servicing was in excess of \$8.5 million a day every day of the year — and no sign of it being addressed.

Our economy was failing, and we were in last place in the Canadian economic equation. We were listed as a have-not province. Surely this could not go on, as we could not do this in our own personal households.

We ran on the promise that change was not only needed; it was necessary, as our social programs were ready to collapse. We have now undergone three and a half years of a restructuring program. It has not been an easy one. A great deal of angst was experienced by all in this province, especially your MLAs that were here on the government side. Our plan has allowed this government to balance a budget that included tax reductions, debt repayment and increased funding for our vital services.

The previous government had eight consecutive deficits and five management plans. They never hit one of their targets once, whereas this government has always hit its targets and always kept its promises. In fact, about 97 percent of our promises have been kept. All you have to do is look at the *New Era* document where it shows that. There are more promises that have not been fulfilled that will be coming down the line.

[1615]

It was not easy to do this, as I said, and there was not really that much joy in doing it. There was a lot of pain and tough love over these past three and a half years, but it was necessary. We had to continue with our plan and not just spend, spend, spend. One thing is for sure: the bankers who have been stepping in would have stepped in if we had continued to spend like they had been doing for the decade before this — as our creditors. They would have been in charge of our destiny, not the taxpayers. It would have been the bankers.

This 2005-06 budget lays out the benefits of the tough and hard work that occurred to create it. The government is now living within its means once again — with balanced budgets, including forecasts of record surpluses.

[Mr. Speaker in the chair.]

I want to mention a few things that the actual budget did include. The budget included a record debt repayment of \$1.7 billion. Our surplus for this year will be \$1.4 billion, as you know, with a forecast for the next three years of \$200 million surpluses. That's approximately \$6.5 million over three years.

Tax reductions. There are going to be \$484 million of tax reductions in this budget, and 730,000 people will see either elimination or reduction of provincial taxes. The 330,000 of them that have less than \$16,000 in income will have no tax. Another 400,000 that earn up to, say, \$26,000 will pay considerably lower taxes.

The MSP premiums are reduced or eliminated and will actually help 215,000 people in British Columbia.

Singles that have less than \$20,000 income will have no costs for MSP premiums. Seniors earning less than \$20,000 or families with less than \$20,000 net income will pay no premiums as well. Those who need it the most will receive the benefits of the hard work over these last three years.

The stronger economy that we now have is creating and generating new revenues for a better, sustainable improvement to our social services. As well as paying down our debt, both the throne speech and budget show that health education and social programs will not be up and down with overnight whims but will be sustainable social services for all. As we go through this budget, it is evident that these reforms have been made to ensure that this province will again be a leader in the economic, environmental and social development of Canada. We're on our way back.

This budget will have an impact on every aspect of this government, and it won't be long before we will see the profound effect of these government policies, as we see immigration coming back from across Canada and immigration from around the world into this province. Our economic, social and environmental policies, with our natural beauty and resources, will create a great future for this province. This budget, in conjunction with the principles laid out in the throne speech last week, will make this province the best-educated, literate and healthy jurisdiction in North America.

Independent businesses are one of the main economic engines that will help British Columbia reach out to become an economic leader. They themselves have recommended to the government that we first reduce our debt significantly, which we have done, and also reduce the small business tax rate and then the corporate rate over the next three years, along with the PST and the personal income tax.

[1620]

Over all, most who I talked to and those that contacted me stressed the need for the surplus to be used, firstly, for debt reduction, and this is what we have done. This is how the independent businesses see our economy strengthening, both the small and medium-sized businesses. They see themselves as a significant part of the economy, which they are, as they employ so many people. They are small in size, but as employers, they represent approximately 60 percent of private sector employment in British Columbia.

While total burden for small businesses has not been reduced in the last few years, the costs of government overall have. The small business federation — there are many of them on the North Shore — wants to see a reduction of taxes and regulations, which will provide many more benefits to the province by attracting investment while, in turn, increasing their productivity. This budget is a very good budget, one that can be supported by all, and I think the people in our province will certainly appreciate what we're endeavouring to do.

In closing, I just wanted to do a small review and maybe read some points that I've taken out of the speech presented to the House by our Minister of Fi-

nance, which I thought were very apropos of this budget and of where we stand in this province. He says:

"I'm amazed at what we have accomplished in the past three years.... In just three years we have turned this province around. We have rebuilt our economy, revitalized our industries and regained our role as a national leader. As a province we have brought back investment, created hundreds of thousands of jobs and strengthened our communities.... The challenge now for all of us is to build on that momentum, and this budget will help us do exactly that...long-term investment in our environment and our communities; new measures to strengthen our economy; new supports for children with special needs and people with disabilities; thousands of new post-secondary training spaces; the highest budgets ever for health care and education; the largest-ever reduction in provincial debt; and income tax and MSP premium changes that, over three years, will leave \$480 million more in the pockets of those who need it the most."

This is "possible because of the economic growth and prudent fiscal management for the last three years. We have proven our ability to stick to our plan and to keep our investments affordable."

Again, I might add there that the NDP has had five plans and never kept one of them.

The budget is all about the people of this province. It's about the nurses and the doctors and the teachers and the child care providers and all those individuals who dedicate their professional lives to caring for others. It's about the loggers and the miners and their support — individuals who literally turn our natural resources into products — and the truck drivers and the port workers and everyone else who helps bring those products to the marketplace.

It's about the small business owners working around the clock to realize their own dreams and, in the process, generating jobs to strengthen our economy. It's about the scientists and the researchers and the risk-takers pushing the very boundaries of what is possible. It's about the families in our province juggling all those daily demands of work and life and raising a family.

These are the people who built our province, who keep it going from day to day. As MLAs we owe it to them and to our constituents to do such, and that's why I'm prepared to support Budget 2005-06.

B. Lekstrom: It is a pleasure to rise in this House this afternoon to speak in favour of this budget, a budget that I think has a very sound base and one that is very sustainable. That is the key word we as British Columbians have to look towards when we talk about our financial ability to deliver the services that we enjoy in British Columbia.

This budget is the result of this government putting a plan in place, following that plan and seeing it through. As my colleague earlier said: "This is about planning and following the plan through to see the reality of all of the hard work."

[1625]

Were there tough decisions? There were many tough decisions over the last number of years in British

Columbia. Were they made for the right reasons? Most definitely. They were made for the single, simple reason that British Columbia was living beyond its means. We were having services delivered to us as British Columbians from one end of this province to the other, but the reality was that many of those services we were enjoying couldn't be afforded by what we had coming in from income.

As a result, when we were elected in 2001, our province was facing a \$3.8 billion structural deficit. Many people in my riding asked what that means. What it means is if British Columbia continued to deliver the services in the method that we did and continued to deliver the same services, we would be spending \$3.8 billion a year more than we brought in. I'm not prepared, as a parent or as a representative in this Legislative Assembly, to continue to dig the hole deeper so that our children have to pay for our greed today. I'm very proud to stand before this Legislature to say we've corrected that problem and turned our province around.

Mr. Speaker, 71 percent of all new funding in this three-year fiscal plan will be spent on health care and education. That is a significant amount of money. Since we were elected in 2001, over 2 billion additional dollars has been invested in health care, with another \$1.5 billion dedicated in this three-year fiscal plan to go directly to health care for the provision of the services needed by British Columbians. It has been part of what I ran on in 2001. It has been a fundamental belief of mine, when I look at financial management, that the basics are that you can't spend money you don't have. As a province we did that for many years. We have spent, out of a roughly \$32 billion taxpayer-supported debt, about \$16 billion as a result of overspending on day-to-day operations.

Debt isn't a bad thing. Most of us in our day-to-day lives incur debt to buy our homes, to purchase a car, possibly to enjoy a holiday. But at the end of the day you take on debt, usually to build a capital asset. You make your payments, and when your home is paid for, you have an asset. When your vehicle is paid for, you have an asset. But if we borrowed money every day to run the day-to-day operations of our households — to buy groceries, to pay the bills — it wouldn't be long before our banker would be knocking on our door telling us we can't continue. You would lose everything that you have worked for all your life. A business is no different, and certainly a province is no different. We had to make changes.

Did we make cuts? I'm always quite amazed when people say: "Well, you cut, and now you are just giving back." That's exactly what we said we'd do. We had to make cuts. We had to live within our financial ability to pay, so that meant downsizing. Downsizing the government when the majority of expenses go to health care and education — and the commitment we made was to not touch those two — was very difficult, but we've done it.

We see a surplus today in our budget, with projected surpluses in the years out, and it's a result of a

number of things. I've heard some of the opponents out there say this is just a result of high commodity prices. Certainly, high commodity prices have helped, but I can tell you it's a good regulatory regime, it's a sound legislative environment that we have in British Columbia, and it's the people of British Columbia that have made this happen. I'm very proud that we've achieved that.

I want to go back to the issue that people seem somewhat surprised that some programs were changed, cut, delivered differently. Many of them seem somewhat shocked. I asked them the simple question. We were delivering those through the nineties with money we didn't have. Did you have any misunderstanding that changes to get our financial house in order were needed in this province? Without exception, for the most part, the people do understand that.

Is change difficult to accept? I think, as human beings, that it is always difficult, regardless of your political affiliation. This budget, I think, shows all of the hard work that took place, not just in this Legislative Assembly and the discussion back and forth amongst members, from the opposition, but it is about British Columbians. It's about what we've heard from them; it's about what their expectations were. I'm sure in my heart that British Columbians today are very thankful that the difficult decisions made over the past couple of years have paid off, and we're seeing that benefit today.

[1630]

We have the lowest unemployment rate this province has seen in over 20 years. That's good news. That isn't news that just comes and drops out of the blue. It comes because people want to invest in your province. It comes because the mining companies are coming back. Mining exploration has quadrupled in the last three and a half years, and I can tell you that is a positive note. In the area that I represent, Peace River South, mining is back in a big way. Mining jobs are high-paying jobs; mining jobs drive our economy in the northeast part of this province. I can tell you that the communities of Tumbler Ridge, Chetwynd, Dawson Creek, Pouce Coupe, Taylor.... Everybody is benefiting from the investment we're seeing from our mining companies because of the changes made in the regulatory environment we've created — one that is sustainable for the mining industry while at the same time ensuring that the highest environmental standards are adhered to. That, again, is good news.

This budget is about a lot of things. I think a lot of the people before me have said it is about the people of British Columbia. That's exactly what it's about. It's not about governments of one political stripe or another. I believe that when governments are in power in Victoria, they're here to represent the people of British Columbia. They take that very seriously, and they do the best job they can.

I can tell you, as a B.C. Liberal standing here today.... Am I proud of what we have accomplished in this province? Extremely. Three and a half years of extremely hard and difficult work and difficult deci-

sions that were made that you know affect families and people.... But if those tough decisions weren't made, our province would still be going downhill, and that's not what we want to see.

I'm going to touch on this budget and what it means to families in British Columbia. I know it has been touched on already. Our tax reductions, which many people over the years have heard were there for the rich, for the few that made all of the money in this province.... This, again, I will disagree with wholeheartedly. They were there for everybody.

This budget is directed at low-income families and seniors. Seven hundred and thirty thousand British Columbians will pay less tax or no tax at all in British Columbia as a result of our ability, through a strong economy, to deliver on that commitment. A total of \$484 million in tax cuts is encompassed in this budget, which is significant. The tax relief, as I indicated, is for low income — for people making \$30,000, \$26,000, \$16,000. That is good news. It leaves money in their pockets, so they can maybe purchase their child a bike that they may not have been able to before, maybe try and grow an account to buy a new home — a number of things, whatever they choose.

The goal of government is to make sure we try and stay out of the pockets of British Columbians so they can spend the money where they want. Having said that, there is a reality. We as British Columbians, and I'm one of them, expect services delivered by a government. I also understand those services cost money. So the reality of saying that I want lower taxes or that I want something more, on one hand, means that, on the other hand, you either have to increase your revenue flow or cut another service. It's that simple.

In British Columbia since 2001 we have increased spending — something that people, I think, have overlooked. We're delivering programs to the best of our ability. Again I'm going to go back to the word I think is key: in a sustainable manner — one that can be sustained this year, next year and for the years out, so that our children have a bright future to look forward to and not a debt-ridden society where all they can look forward to is paying down a debt that our greed created.

There was an increase in the vehicle surtax — and many people refer to it as a luxury tax — from \$47,000 to \$49,000. That's good news for British Columbians, and it's good news for us in the northeast part of our province.

It was interesting. I heard a report — I believe it was just yesterday — that this luxury tax increase was so that people could go out and buy their new cars and so on. Well, I can tell you that in the northeast and in most of the north in resource communities, we don't look at it that way. Most people go out and have to buy their pickup trucks, their three-quarter tons, their half-tons, their flatbeds. I can tell you that with the price of vehicles today these trucks are used to make a living. They're used every day by the people that get in them and drive out to the oil patch — or within the forest industry, mining industry — to go out and earn a liv-

ing to bring home enough money to raise their family and provide for them. So, this is good news.

[1635]

Taxes are something, when you look across this country.... I believe we now have the second overall lowest taxes in the entire country, next to our neighbours to the east. That's good news. We have the single lowest rate in this country for earners on the first \$63,000 of income. That's good news.

Has it worked? People want to know if tax cuts work. I believe it has. In looking at what's taken place with the economy in British Columbia over the last three and a half years, it's clear to me. We see people coming back to British Columbia. We see professionals that have earned and chosen to go live elsewhere staying in British Columbia. We see people with more money in their pocket and spending it the way they choose to. So, tax cuts — do they work? Most definitely they do.

I can tell you a highlight for me in this, and I'm sure for a lot of British Columbians, was the issue of debt repayment. Our debt has been growing over the years and will continue to grow for capital investment but not for operational debt. I will differentiate that. Operational debt is when you borrow money to service the day-to-day operations, not to build roads, hospitals or schools. That's unacceptable. We have stopped that and have made a significant contribution to debt repayment. As a result of the strong economy that we're seeing, \$1.7 billion is going to pay down our debt in British Columbia, and that is good news for everybody. That allows us to save over \$100 million annually in debt repayment. That is \$100 million more we can spend on programs for children, for seniors, for those in need. That's where the money should go — not to pay interest on a debt if you can avoid that.

As I indicated before, \$16 billion of the \$32 billion that was being talked about and looked at in our financial plan was a result of operational debt. Again, I can't emphasize enough how important it is not to overspend on operations with money you don't have. We have corrected that.

Health care has been a challenge and continues to be a challenge — I don't think anybody would say any different — not just in British Columbia, but right across this country, right across North America for that matter. Since 2001, when we were elected, we have increased the health care budget by over \$2 billion. That is a huge amount of money: two thousand million additional dollars into health care, with an additional \$1.5 billion in this year's fiscal plan committed to health care over the next three years. That will see roughly a \$3.5 billion to \$3.8 billion increase in health care from 2001, when we were elected, until the end of our three-year fiscal plan that was presented here this week. That's significant.

We have seen an increase, and I will use some numbers from 2001, when we were elected. Our health care budget has grown by \$3.027 billion between then and the '05-06 budget which was just presented. That is a lot of money. Does it mean health care is better to-

day? I'm not so sure, but it definitely tells me that all the money in the world sometimes can't fix a problem.

What we need to do is look at how we deliver health care, how those services are provided and what the needs of people are. Because we're seeing, as technology grows and advances in that area, that people are achieving and receiving hip replacements, knee surgeries and all kinds of surgeries at an earlier age. We're keeping people healthy longer so they can live a vibrant life well into their nineties, to 100 or possibly higher.

But with that comes the reality that the costs of health care will rise. We have recognized that. We have put a plan in place, and that's what our three-year fiscal plan and three-year ministry plans accommodate. We don't look one year out. We don't look two years out. We look three years at the minimum, and with each year that is concluded, a new year comes on. That's good news.

We spend — this is quite staggering as well, and the more you are in this job the more you learn, because there is not a day that goes by that you can't learn something — over \$30 million a day on health care — \$30 million a day on health care alone. Again, staggering numbers, numbers that I think sometimes, when we say them, just go by without us paying a lot of thought.

What will \$30 million do? It will do a lot. It will provide health care for one day in British Columbia. We could do a lot more in other areas, but our commitment when we ran for office in 2001 — and have lived up to 100 percent — was that we would not cut funding to health care and would not cut funding to education. Not only have we lived up to that, we have enhanced it each and every year.

[1640]

We have attracted more doctors to British Columbia in 2003 than any other jurisdiction in Canada. That is good news. That means we're doing something right — unlike what some people may have you think, where health care has gone completely downhill. I hear with amazement that health care has been cut. I'd like to know the math teacher who taught that person how to add, because it just isn't factual. It just doesn't work that way. From '01 until the '05-06 budget we see an increase — and I'm going to say this again — of over \$3 billion. That's very good.

We have doubled the number of doctors we train in British Columbia, which is great news for British Columbians. We used to train roughly 156 doctors, I believe, who would graduate each year in British Columbia. We made a commitment as a government that we were going to double that number, and we've lived up to that. We have enhanced the provision for doctors' training at the University of British Columbia and the University of Victoria. For the first time in history we are now training doctors in northern British Columbia at the University of Northern British Columbia, which means people in the north have better access to that training, if that's their choice, in the field. I think it brings them an understanding of northern health care. Again, that's good news.

We hear a lot about wait-lists, and we have done a lot to try and deal with that. Between 2001-02 and 2003-04 we actually had an 8 percent increase in the number of surgeries performed in British Columbia — roughly 68,000 additional procedures. So when people say that you aren't doing as much, I have to question the numbers and where they get those numbers. Have wait-lists grown? I think there are more people today requiring more surgery, as I indicated. We're delivering surgery more efficiently and more effectively with higher technologies. Again, we made a commitment in this budget to try to catch up. This is not a new phenomenon — wait-lists. This is not something that was sprung in 2001. This is something governments struggle with.

I can tell you as an individual.... I'm sure I can speak for everybody in here. There isn't one person that wouldn't like to have every single surgery done immediately. But again, we live in this world, and we call it life. Sometimes what we wish for doesn't always happen, so you try and do the best you can. Again, we are moving ahead. We have made that commitment. Again, it isn't government policy that allows that to happen. It's the nurses, it's the doctors, and it's the health care professionals that are the ones who provide that service — the professionals on the ground who deliver that.

Again, sometimes you hear that people.... We don't respect them. The member for Peace River South doesn't respect what they do. Well, I can tell you, Mr. Speaker, I do. Do I realize there are challenges in their field? There are. Are there challenges in the field of being a member of the Legislative Assembly? There are. I believe there is probably a challenge in every single field of every workforce out there.

There are two ways to deal with it. One, you can wake up with a negative attitude and start your day that way. Chances are, in my belief, you will have negative results. The other way is that you can wake up and face that day with a positive attitude, knowing you have challenges ahead of you. Chances are you'll work through those challenges and find a way to make them better. That's what we're doing as a government.

Advanced education — again, something I've worked on with the minister and my colleagues. I'm very proud of what we have been able to accomplish. We have committed to the single largest expansion of post-secondary seats in this province in the last 40 years — 25,000 new seats. That's a significant contribution. We have and we spend in this year's budget, the '05-06 budget, \$1.956 billion on advanced education.

There has been a lot of talk about tuition fees and the increases after the freeze was lifted. But I can tell you, Mr. Speaker, that it doesn't seem to have hampered our students going to university. Our growth in university enrolment has grown at a greater pace than it did during the time of the freeze. I do have a daughter in university. Is it a financial...? I wouldn't call it a burden but a financial commitment. It is, significantly. It is made by the individual and by the family together.

[1645]

For the low-income there's the opportunity for student loans. We're seeing more bursaries put out there. It's good news, what's going on in our system, as much as some people would like to have you think not. A freeze creates problems, and we've seen that. We heard it from our colleges and universities, and I wouldn't expect to hear it from the students. If somebody froze tuition, as a student I would think that would be okay, but there were some effects to that. There were students that, rather than have a four-year diploma in four years, had to go back for an extra semester because classes were so full that those universities didn't have the ability to upgrade. So the actual cost increased. Those types of things happen.

We've made a commitment that we're going to cap tuition fees at a rate of inflation, which is good news for students. It means that our universities and colleges can still access and continue to grow — utilize the money they need to run their day-to-day operations. It will give some security to the students who are enrolling and who are already in existing programs as to what they can foresee for their tuition increases.

We've actually created 2,134 nurse training spaces in this province — 2,134 spaces. That is good news. Again, when we think about health care, many times people think about doctors — that seems to be the first thing. But I can tell you that without the nurses, caregivers and all of the support staff, our health care system wouldn't be what it is. People will wonder why I say that. Well, probably all of us in this Legislative Assembly have either family or friends that work in that industry. I can tell you they don't go into it to get rich. They go into it because of their love and their feeling that they want to care for people, and that's what they do.

Our trades and apprenticeships are going very well. Northern Lights College — a college in my community, based in my community — serves the entire northeast and parts of the northwest of this great province. It leads the way, and I'm very proud to be a representative of an area where Northern Lights College is so committed to the people of the north, as well as anybody coming to that campus.

We actually have just seen an announcement of \$12 million to enhance trades and apprenticeship training in the northeast, particularly for the oil and gas training initiatives. That will go at the Fort St. John campus. I know my colleague from Peace River North was excited about that, as we all were. It will allow opportunities for training of our children and for people wishing to take on that initiative to try and get the training they need to work in the oil patch. It's great news.

We have more apprentices registered in this province today than we did in 2001. Many people want to know what's going on with our trades and apprenticeship training. It's going very well; I can tell you that. A big part of that.... I'm very proud of school district 59, the school district which I represent, who have been leaders in that field of partnerships — their grades 11 and 12 students — with Northern Lights College and with BCIT. Students, if they choose a career path when

they're in grades 10, 11, 12, have the ability to know that they can begin that career training early. They can begin it in their grade 11 and 12 years.

We've seen a number of our students, not just in the northeast but across this province, drop out at an early age, before they've completed grade 12, for the simple fact that they knew they wanted to be a welder, a carpenter, an electrician, a plumber, a pipefitter. And the list goes on. They didn't think they needed grade 12, so they immediately went into a college system or an apprenticeship and began that work.

It's interesting. I think the minimum our students need today is grade 12. That grade 12 is just the beginning. What we see today are more people than ever completing high school. I believe last year's number was 79 percent, up from 76 percent in 2001, which is a good trend. I think we'd all like to see it at 100 percent. I give credit to the school district that I represent, school district 59. I give credit to the partnerships they have with Northern Lights College and BCIT. I give credit to the people who had that vision that this is what the children wanted — if they didn't want to pursue a university education, but wanted to pursue college, trades and apprenticeship — and that we could find a method for them to work through that. That's an extremely positive issue.

[1650]

Our K-to-12 education system is addressed as well in this budget, a \$150 million increase — the single largest addition to K-to-12 education in a decade, I believe. That says a lot about this government. Again, there are still a few — I say a few because I think most people have taken the time to look at the numbers — saying that education has been cut. Nothing could be further from the truth. In 2000-01 we actually had a budget for our K-to-12 system of \$4.62 billion. Our '05-06 budget that was presented by the hon. minister earlier this week stands at \$5.06 billion — an increase of \$440 million, all at the same time as our student population is declining as a result of families having fewer children and so on. We have to point that out.

I do have people that come and indicate — not maliciously — that we have cut funding. They say they heard that. "We heard you cut funding to education." When I sit down and show them the book and the facts and the numbers, they are actually quite amazed. I encourage them to go back to the person who said that funding was cut and challenge them as to where they found those numbers. It is quite an easy challenge to win, because they don't have the numbers. It's rhetoric.

We have the highest per-student funding ever in the history of British Columbia taking place today in our province. That's good news. We have the highest completion rates, and we are recognized as a world leader with our students — whether it be in math, reading or writing.

I'm going to step back and take a moment to say: is that a result of good policy in government? Is that a result of good regulation? I'm going to give credit where credit is due, and that's a result of the great teachers we have in this province, certainly. I think

people who become educators take that on because it is their wish in life to help children, to teach children. Again, if money is what everything was about in this world, we wouldn't see people becoming teachers. Their pay is reasonable, but it's not something you are going to get rich at. It's something you'll make a living at, provide for your family, but the fulfilment you will have as a result of taking on something you've wanted to do to help people in this world is far greater than money can pay for. That's why people do that.

I talked about fewer students. As a result of fewer students in our school systems, we are seeing some schools close. Not only are we seeing schools close, as we so often hear about on the negative side, we are seeing schools open.

I want to talk about why some schools are closing. I will speak not about the ones that need rebuilding because they're old and not about ones that have problems structurally. With fewer students in our system today, we are seeing schools run at 30 percent to 40 percent capacity. That makes absolutely no sense whatsoever to me. I would rather see one school run at 80 percent capacity than two schools run at 40 percent, for the simple fact that the money in our budget will go directly to the student rather than running a half-empty school — for the lights, the heat and so on. That, to me, doesn't make sense. I don't think, unless I have missed something drastic, that it could make sense to anybody.

I also want to recognize that when a school closes, it has an effect. It has an effect on the community. It has an effect on the families, and it's thought about. I think that when you're looking at your resources available to you and what you have to deliver, it does make some sense to consolidate where you can.

This budget is a good-news budget. People will say that it is a good-news budget because we're going into an election. It's a good-news budget because we lived up to our commitment and did what we said we would do. We said we would reinvest in this province. We would reinvest in health care, education, our social programs and our families when we had the ability to do it. What you see in Budget '05-06 is the ability to do that.

We have created, as I indicated earlier, more jobs than any other jurisdiction in Canada. In British Columbia, 197,000 new jobs have been created. I want to point this out: 191,000 of those jobs are full-time — not part-time, not low-paying jobs but good jobs. We're seeing the lowest unemployment rate we've seen in over 20 years, as I indicated. Is that a result of poor management? No, it's a result of sound financial management. It's the result of a government putting in a regulatory regime where people want to invest their capital and create jobs for ourselves and our children. It is the result of British Columbians wanting to do what they can.

I could talk at length on this budget, but I can see the light has come on. With all due respect, I will close with this. We're here for the people of British Columbia. Everybody that holds this job brings something to

this Legislative Assembly in the belief that they can make British Columbia a better place. I'm proud to say that in the last three and a half years we have seen British Columbia go from a have-not province that was created through the nineties to a province that leads the country and is back to where it rightfully belongs.

[1655]

I full-heartedly support this budget, and I'm proud to be the representative for Peace River South.

K. Manhas: I am proud and pleased to rise today in support of our government's budget. Before I speak too much on the budget.... I was listening to the Leader of the Opposition with great interest, and I just had to note the irony of the Leader of the Opposition's comments that they won't have time to debate the budget. The members of this House know that the leader of a party is allotted two hours to speak to a budget, to refer to specific items in the budget, to talk about each thing that the budget has within it — their concerns about the budget, their concerns about particular items in the budget.

I noted with interest that the Leader of the Opposition only used half an hour of that two-hour statement. I do find that irony significant. I think British Columbians trust parties when their statements are consistent with their actions. I think our government, the B.C. Liberal government, has made statements about what we want to accomplish, and we have come through with them. Our actions have been consistent with exactly what we said we were going to do.

I also noted the Leader of the Opposition mentioned that one of the particular items of debate was the Gateway Project. The Gateway Project is very important to members in my community. The Leader of the Opposition mentioned there hasn't been enough consultation as to the needs of the infrastructure we're going to be investing in under the Gateway Project. The Gateway Council spent over two years looking at the need in the lower mainland to get traffic and goods moving through the lower mainland, to get the province's economy moving by having goods and traffic move more efficiently through the greater Vancouver area.

In my community of Port Coquitlam-Burke Mountain, the Tri-Cities are clogged with traffic. Businesses that locate in the area want to get to the United States. They want to get to the ferry terminal. They want to access the ports. They want to get to the airport. They want to get their goods onto trains to get to the rest of the country or onto trucks that can cross the Port Mann Bridge, so they can actually deliver their goods at a rate that is efficient, so they're competitive with the rest of the country and competitive with different areas. They just can't do that. They're clogged.

It takes residents in my community and goods that are moving out of my community, in the middle of the day, half an hour to an hour just to get to the entrance of the freeway so they can start to cross the Port Mann Bridge. That is completely unacceptable.

If there is any doubt that the investments of the Gateway Project are needed, I challenge the Leader of

the Opposition, any member of the opposition and any member of the public to sit on the roads in British Columbia — in Port Coquitlam and Coquitlam — and try to see how long it takes to get across to Surrey, across to the rest of Canada, across to the ferry terminal or the ports — Vancouver Port.

We have done enough talking. For once our government, seeing that we have turned our economy around, used that surplus, that opportunity, to start paying down some of the capital that we've known for 20 years is needed in this province. I think that is extremely laudable. I can't even imagine that the Leader of the Opposition would be suggesting there is no consultation being done.

For a year now we've known the Gateway Project has been on the books and that it's something that has been considered. It's been embraced by the provincial government. TransLink in the GVRD has tried to do its part. The provincial government, at long last, has come to the table and said: "Okay. Yes." There are certain improvements that are provincial improvements. One is the Pitt River Bridge, because getting across from Port Coquitlam to Pitt Meadows, across the Pitt River Bridge, which is a swing bridge.... When it opens, it debilitates the entire town.

[1700]

We have traffic that already takes 20 minutes to half an hour, backed up on the Lougheed Highway, stopped because of congestion. It's stopped on local roads; it's stopped in the downtown core. People are completely stranded. From Maple Ridge and Pitt Meadows you can't get out. There is no way out. There is no other bridge. You have to go all the way over to Mission or wait in the lineups for the Albion ferry to try to get out of Maple Ridge and Pitt Meadows, if you are stuck there. There have been times the bridge has broken down because the swing hasn't closed properly. People have been completely stranded, and businesses have been stranded. That's unacceptable.

The Gateway Project is looking at three major things. It's looking to move traffic along the north of the Fraser from Maple Ridge through to New Westminster and trying to increase those connections, because we know they're needed. We know they're needed at the Pitt River Bridge. My constituents have told me they are needed at the Pitt River Bridge. There is no question about that.

We know that they're needed to connect the Mary Hill Bypass to United Boulevard. We know they're needed to get through New Westminster, because you can't get through New Westminster. It takes forever. It's the plug that traffic gets locked in, getting out of the northeast sector. We know that it's needed to improve traffic movement across the Port Mann Bridge and along the entire Trans-Canada Highway corridor.

We know that it's needed along the South Fraser to get to Deltaport and to the ferries, because I, as a user, have actually tried to get from Coquitlam to the ferries. Even if there's no traffic, God help me if I can get there in less than an hour, and that is unacceptable. Generally, our streets are clogged and they don't connect.

If we are going to be a leader in the economy, we have to stop this divisive debate and actually start applauding when something is done right. I challenge the opposition to come out and say: "Look, we know that even we were told these things need to be done." Now there's a government that is saying that we're not going to saddle the province with operating debt, but when we do have money, we will invest the capital that's needed to move this province forward.

With this budget our government is doing exactly what we said we would do when we set out in 2001. We said our first goal would be to balance the budget and get the economy moving. We said that would give our economy the kick-start it needed by decreasing taxes and cutting regulation and red tape, and that we would do whatever it took to increase people's confidence in British Columbia and get our economy back on track.

We said that the process would be tough and that it would take some tough decisions and tough years, but they were needed to reach our goals. We did that. We were upfront about that and we did that. Our plan has evidently worked. British Columbians can see that it works, and it has shown, through this budget, that it did work.

In the way getting to our position now we were faced with significant challenges: 9/11, SARS, forest fires, floods, softwood lumber, pine beetle infestations. All of our largest industries were affected by some kind of major issue or another. We worried that might affect our plan, but we kept vigilant. Our government — the Premier — kept vigilant, right on top of the issues as they arose, and that's a sign of leadership. You set out a course. You set out to meet your destination.

Over the course of that time there are many small course changes that might be required to make sure you do stay on course, and we did those. We knew we had to make small adjustments to make sure we stayed on course and kept to our goal. When we set out prior to the last election, we set out the *New Era* document that most British Columbians are familiar with as our party's platform. It had 201 distinct commitments. Imagine this as a journey. If one set out to fly from one point to the next, to a final end, and had 201 distinct stops on the way, imagine how difficult it would be to meet each one of those on track.

[1705]

In the last four years our government met 193 of those checkpoints. That's 97 percent efficiency, a 97 percent target rate. Imagine this was Air Canada, WestJet or whatever airline you might look at. If any company, airline or pilot set out to get to a goal that was 201 checkstops away and landing 201 spots away.... Imagine a 97 percent on-time rate, a 97 percent efficiency, saying: "We got exactly where we wanted to in the time that we needed to."

There are eight commitments that people may have some debate on, but perhaps those eight commitments couldn't have been met in the time we allotted. We met 193 of them, and those other eight are going to continue to be worked on, engaged in, perhaps in another

term in government. Those are the things that government needs to continue looking at. Not knowing the outlook, the weather that someone sets out in before setting their course, a 97 percent efficiency rate, a 97 percent on-time rate, is pretty remarkable.

Unlike the NDP one of the things I think British Columbians have seen is that we do have a plan. We did have a plan when we started, we continue to have a plan, and we set out to meet that plan. British Columbians can see the difference it makes between having a plan and not having one. British Columbians can see our plan is working.

We were elected in 2001 to revive the economy, to get our fiscal house in order and to balance the budget. That's exactly what we did. We did balance the budget in a long-term way, in a sustainable way. We did it in a way that we could start paying down some of those excesses of the past government.

We've started, in this budget, by paying down a minimum of \$1.7 billion in debt — a minimum. We always said that once we got our economy in shape, we would start having the revenue that government needed to start paying for the services that British Columbians wanted. That is what we've started to do. We know there are things we want to invest in. We knew when we started that there were things we wanted to be able to do but that we couldn't do. Now we have the ability to do it, and we're doing it within a structured plan.

We're providing almost half a billion dollars in tax cuts to those people who need it most. Those are targeted tax cuts to middle-, middle-low- and low-income British Columbians who need that support the most. We're providing new services and improved services to make sure that British Columbians have what they need. That's what you do when you actually have a plan: you manage a situation well and you provide leadership. That is what you can do.

We're starting to have the revenue we need to start making some of those long-term investments, things like the Gateway Project; the Pitt River Bridge; the twinning of the Port Mann Bridge; a better, more user-friendly Trans-Canada Highway that you can actually get onto; and rapid transit. Those are things that governments can do when the economy is moving and revenues are starting to come in.

[1710]

When we formed government, we had a history, budget after budget, of debt — not debt that allowed the province to move forward, not debt that was as a result of the province investing in capital dollars but debt that was a result of the government of the day spending more on the services they wanted than they had money to do.

[J. Weisbeck in the chair.]

I think it's viscerally repugnant for a government to go into debt for operating when they don't need to. It's like someone saying to their kids: "You know, kids, I'm going to borrow \$100,000 in both of our names and use

it so I can go travelling, buy a nice car, nice clothes, a bunch of other things that I'm not earning enough money to do. Now, I won't be able to pay all of it back, but you'll be responsible. You'll have to pay it back. You do it. You may not be able to use any of those things, but you'll have to pay it back." Nobody would do that. No good parent would ever do that.

Governments must stay within their means to run their year-to-year services and not pile their excesses into long-term debt. This is a clear principle. That's what British Columbians want us to do. That is what we've tried to do. That is what we've actually accomplished. Our children and grandchildren should not have to pay back money for things they shared no benefit in, because no parent or grandparent in British Columbia would want to strain their kids, their grandkids with that kind of a burden.

That's not to say that all debt is bad. I said earlier that governments need to invest in infrastructure which no single person would be able to do. Governments have the responsibility to go out there and make the province a better place, to invest in infrastructure that the province needs to keep it moving, to make it more competitive, to make the lives of citizens better and to provide services that their citizens need to have. That's a responsibility of government. As a young person I want my government to be investing in infrastructure. It makes the province a better place.

I don't have a problem with paying for a portion of that cost, because that cost has a benefit over a number of years. That cost should be amortized, allocated over that number of years to the people who receive some benefit from it. I don't have a problem, as a young person, in us going out and borrowing money to build an airport that's clearly clogged and needed or a road that's clearly clogged and needed — when we know that if we don't do these things, we'll lose a competitive edge. Young people who are growing up in this province will not be able to compete with other jurisdictions, because other jurisdictions will do that and we'll stay in our clogged, closed-in jurisdiction without any infrastructure.

We need to do that, and that's exactly what the government is doing. It should be investing, and it is clear in this budget that money has been allocated. I look forward to seeing that. British Columbians are excited to see where that will go.

I know the opposition is upset that they can't see every single dollar issued. In due time everything.... We operate a transparent government. Everything in the budget is open to anybody in the public who wants to take a look at it. We're the only government who uses generally accepted accounting principles. There's nothing to hide, and everybody will see the benefits of those investments.

I certainly am very happy and very proud that the Minister of Finance has allocated those funds to make sure there are funds available to make needed investments in infrastructure. We'll still have mortgages for the infrastructure we built, and that's how it should be, but we will eliminate as much of the debt as makes up

for the loans, if you will, that we took out to make the bridge payments year after year for over a decade to cover our yearly expenses.

Total provincial debt at the end of the next year, fiscal year 2004-05, is forecast at \$36.1 billion, a \$1.7 billion decline from the year before. This is the largest debt reduction in B.C.'s history. With the contingencies, with the plan in place this will actually make up the largest debt decrease in the province's history, and I think that's something to be proud of.

[1715]

For British Columbians to know why that is so laudable, we need to know how much of a difference that makes. By paying down that debt we eliminate huge interest charges. Reducing the operating debt we pay by that \$1.7 billion in this one year will save us \$125 million every single year, year after year after year.

That \$125 million less in interest charges, instead of going to banks, can help provide services for British Columbians that they need, that we need to make our province a better place. That \$125 million, in this year, for example, is going to make sure that we can provide a rate increase for persons with disabilities — something we've wanted to do for three years but haven't been in a position to be able to do. We can do that now, and we are doing that now. That will make up \$56 million of that \$125 million.

We're able to put more police officers on the ground, so people who live in Port Coquitlam, Coquitlam and Port Moody can be safer. We're spending \$44 million to put those police officers around B.C. and make sure that our courts and correctional institutions, like North Fraser Pretrial in Port Coquitlam, are adequately staffed and have the resources they need.

We are able to put some money into new funding for women's transition houses — that's \$13 million out of that \$125 million — plus social housing to support independent living, to support those goals we set out. We set out a plan that shows that people want to have independent living options. We are providing \$12 million out of that \$125 million in savings to ensure that happens. I think that's very laudable.

Because we've met or exceeded our budget targets every single year since we've been in government, one of the three bond-rating agencies, Standard and Poor's, recently gave B.C. its first credit rating upgrade in 15 years. That's very significant as well. There's one earlier who had given us a credit rating increase. There's one left, and we have no doubt that they will come to the same level as these two. That makes a difference. The reason they did it is because of "government's track record since coming to power in 2001 of consistently meeting and in some cases exceeding annual budget targets."

That's how our province is looked at. That's how investors and third parties look at the governance and the leadership of our province. A better bond rating means that people in British Columbia will have to pay less for their debt costs, so the money we're borrowing costs us less. We have to pay less interest year after

year after year as long as the bond-rating agency rating stays at this level, stays favourable.

We know how investors looked at the last government. We can't afford to go back to that. Nobody wants to see the province go back into decline. That's what will happen if, by some very, very frightening, scary reason, British Columbia might go over to an NDP government. That can't happen. That won't happen. British Columbians won't let that happen, I know, but there is great danger in us not being able to make and meet our targets for the potential that this province has unless we continue to make sure that a B.C. Liberal government stays in place.

I know that British Columbians and members of my community — because they've told me — want to make sure that continues happening. They have hope. They have hope now, and they want to make sure that continues so that their kids and their grandkids have a future.

I've talked to members in my own riding about what it means to have a lower bond rating. What does it relate to in our lives? The best comparison I've given is it means that it's going to cost us less to do whatever we want to do. It's like comparing it to your mortgage.

[1720]

If a bank looks at you and says, "You know what, Mrs. Jones, Mr. Jones? You've been organizing your funds very well over the last little while. We have confidence in your fiscal situation. We have confidence in you. We know that you have other options. We know that other people, because of your history, have much higher confidence in you," it's because they feel safer. They can see what fiscal position you're in, and they can see that there's a plan in the future, so there's less risk in doing business with you. "As a result, we're going to give you a mortgage rate that's, let's say, 1 percent less than the rate that we're giving everybody else."

That makes a difference. Any homeowner knows that when they have a decrease in their mortgage rate, it makes a huge difference in what they're able to do month after month, year after year. If you can imagine the difference that it makes in a household, just imagine what a difference it makes to a whole government that can then allocate that money away from bank charges towards services. That is the concrete benefit of fiscal management. That is something that only this government has shown it can do and that this Finance minister has shown he will continue doing.

As we have increased our revenues and as we decrease the expenses that we're spending on things like interest charges that provide no benefit to citizens, we can start spending money on the things that we set out to say were important targets for our government and important targets for my caucus. We can start having the revenues that are necessary to provide those services to people, to increase those health care services like shorter wait times, to increase education services so that British Columbian kids have the best educational outcomes of any place in North America. Imagine what that does to a province.

Our human resources capital is everything that we have. Our kids, growing up better educated than anywhere else, are more flexible and better equipped to get further, succeed, innovate and make sure that our province is better than anywhere in the world, anywhere in North America, and that it's the best it possibly can be.

We can invest in more police officers, and we're doing that. We can invest in child and family services like initiatives in our community — the pilot projects on youth asset development and Youth Matters! in Coquitlam, Port Coquitlam and Port Moody — that help encourage and increase the connections between members in the community and the youth growing up in the community so that even outside of school they have mentors. They have people who care about them, who connect with them and actually help them achieve their potential and ensure that they achieve the successes they're capable of.

We can invest in more and better child care. We know that a growing economy means that people have the ability to go out and work. The jobs are there. We need to make sure that those parents who can't afford to — and all of the parents in the province who are going out there on dual incomes, trying to make ends meet and provide the best for their kids — have a place they know and feel secure in, where they can leave their child and have access to good quality child care. That is also what we're doing, and it has been increased in this budget.

We can do more on early childhood initiatives — we've shown our leadership in the last three years, and that is continuing to happen as well — and more on college and university spaces and programs, so more kids that are growing up in this province actually have access to meeting their potential later in life. When we got into power, in talking to colleagues and friends of mine more times than not kids who were graduating wanted to get a better education. They wanted to go to university and college, but because they didn't have 85 percent or 90 percent in high school, they couldn't get in. That reduces the number of citizens that are educated and exposed to a broader number of different fields. It reduces the number of citizens that can provide a greater contribution. We don't want to limit the future of our students.

[1725]

The 25,000 spaces are going to go a long way. We know that we need to continue that. That's not the end. This budget actually provides for spaces and capital to accommodate those new spaces.

We know that one of the greatest sources of stress in families is often financial stress, the stress of not having a job. The Premier has often said that an economy that's flourishing — that provides a good, stable job for everyone that needs one — is the best social policy we can have. We need to continue making sure that that happens. We need to create a climate that allows young people to flourish. This budget makes sure that we are actually doing that.

I will quickly sum up.

Deputy Speaker: Member, your time has expired.

K. Manhas: Okay, I understand. Like the prior speaker.... There is so much exciting stuff to happen. I know this budget provides the foundation for that.

We will soon be the economic powerhouse of North America and the capital of Asia Pacific. We need to ensure that this government continues on to make sure that happens over the next four years. When they do and when this government continues forward with its plans in the years to come, B.C. will indeed become second to none, and the future will be brighter than anyone can even imagine. I can't wait to be a part of it.

Hon. P. Wong: It's my pleasure to rise in the House today to respond to the budget. This year's budget presented a plan that will keep British Columbia on track to becoming the best place in Canada — and I would say in the world — to live.

This government has made strong, safe and healthy communities a priority. We are spending \$122 million to hire 215 new RCMP officers to keep our communities safe. We are returning \$95 million of traffic fine revenues to cities to support community policing, crime prevention and other initiatives to make communities safer.

We have made education a priority each year. We could increase funding for education. This budget increases the education budget by \$622 million. It is the single largest funding increase in a decade. It's money that will go to support libraries, music and arts programs, literacy and special needs.

It has made economic development a priority. Since December of 2001, B.C. has created 197,500 new jobs. Employment has grown more than 10 percent, more than any other province. This year we repaid \$1.7 billion of our debt, the largest debt repayment in the province's history. This is a good example of fiscal prudence.

It has made supporting people a priority. The budget reduced taxes for 730,000 low-income British Columbians, and 330,000 of those most in need will not pay any tax at all.

A balanced budget gives us choices — choices to reduce the debt, choices to cut taxes and choices to invest in communities. As Minister of State for Immigration and Multicultural Services I am very pleased to see that in both the budget and throne speeches our government makes many commitments to British Columbians, commitments that my ministry will help deliver.

[1730]

First, I would like to say that this government is committed to immigration. B.C. receives more than 35,000 immigrants each year. About 64 percent are between the ages of 20 and 59, and many already have the skills our economy needs. We understand the value that immigration brings to our province: innovation, help in filling labour shortages, investment, and arts and culture. We know that immigration will help ensure that this province continues to be the best place on earth to work, live and play.

Let me also talk about the Asia-Pacific gateway strategy. This takes place against the backdrop of the government's recognition of the golden opportunity we have as the natural gateway to the Asia-Pacific. Investment in our province from Asia-Pacific countries is now at an all-time high, and more will be forthcoming.

Visitors from the Pacific Rim continue to flock to British Columbia in ever-higher numbers each year. International students continue to choose British Columbia secondary schools and post-secondary institutions for the quality and calibre of education we provide and for the experience we offer. We are blessed to have large communities of Canadians from Asia-Pacific cultures throughout our province.

Plans to enhance the Asia-Pacific gateway, as outlined in the Speech from the Throne, include the opening of our ports, airports, roads and rail services to ensure the smooth movement of goods, services and people within the Pacific Rim. From Prince Rupert to Fort Nelson, from Victoria and Vancouver to Creston and all points in between, the entire province will benefit from expanded relationships with our Asia-Pacific neighbours.

The new Asia-Pacific trade council will ensure that our province will be able to expand B.C.'s interest in the region by advising the government on how best to target its resources in the Asia-Pacific. This will ensure the best return on our investments, furthering B.C.'s golden decade and ensuring a sustainable future for generations to come.

B.C. businesses and industries will be assisted in achieving success through the competition council, which will review B.C.'s competitiveness and ensure that we remain on track with the goals of the Asia-Pacific gateway and B.C.'s golden decade. We will continue to build on successful business trips to India, Japan, China and other emerging markets as we pursue new gateways to growth.

I have participated in several trade missions to the Asia-Pacific and have seen firsthand the immense impact of the Asian economy upon our province. By travelling to key markets in the Asia-Pacific, we have not only grown our relationship but have concluded many agreements that are continuing to have huge benefits for British Columbia.

One such success is the gas conversion project undertaken by the B.C. companies Westport Innovations and Ballard Power Systems to convert over 1,000 public buses in Beijing. This is a showcase of our environmental technology in British Columbia.

Another project is Dream Home Canada in Shanghai. China's large population and rapidly expanding economy have created a huge demand for B.C. exports, including pulp, copper and softwood lumber. This translates to millions of dollars and many jobs in our revitalized economy.

We have increased our timber sales three times since the Premier's last visit to China in 2001. The project is not simply about exporting raw goods. It's a sharing of expertise and knowledge between our province and China. It is also a promotion of our best for-

estry practices around the world. Our demonstration centre in Shanghai not only provides greater office space for B.C. forest marketing organizations but showcases our advanced wood technology and architectural prowess in wood-frame construction right in the market.

[1735]

We have signed a memorandum of understanding with the municipal government of Shanghai with regard to housing standards and codes that support the use of wood in conjunction with traditional Chinese building materials like concrete. By creating demand in China for more B.C. wood products, we are positioning our province to become China's significant supplier of wood products, as we have successfully achieved in Japan, Taiwan and the United States.

The province's investment in this project is creating demand not only for our product but for our services. Under its terms, architects, builders and engineers from our province will work with our partners in China to construct wood-frame houses. This shared knowledge, expertise and skill is furthering the strong relationship we have with China now and will continue to strengthen this relationship for many years in the future.

Our partnership with the Asia-Pacific countries does not end with our trips to the region nor with our agreements there. We are working with our significant Asia-Pacific communities here at home to continue building on these relationships. We will make use of the contacts of the immigrants already arrived from China, India, Korea, Philippines, Japan, Malaysia, Singapore, Vietnam, Hong Kong and many others.

The nuts and bolts of my responsibility as the Minister of State for Immigration and Multicultural Services are to encourage people to come to British Columbia and to deliver relevant programs to them once they are here. I take this responsibility very seriously. I am an immigrant. I came to Canada and never regretted that decision. Like hundreds of thousands of immigrants, I worked hard, and I achieved much.

I know firsthand what it's like to build a new life, and now I know firsthand what it is like to try to deliver the programs that can make such a difference in the lives of immigrants. I have seen these programs from both sides — as someone who used them and as someone who delivers them. I am committed to making sure that we deliver them effectively and efficiently.

The way to do that, I believe, is to work closely with a variety of service providers, including non-profit and volunteer organizations, public institutions and the private sector so that we get the maximum benefit for every taxpayer's dollar that we spend. I have worked with many community organizations since coming to Canada, and I know that this approach keeps us as a government and as a ministry in close contact with the people who are using these services.

There are many programs offered by our ministry to immigrants. First, the B.C. settlement and adaptation program is one of B.C.'s longest-running programs for

immigrants. It provides information and support services, community bridging, English-language services for adults, and sectoral support and delivery assistance. We rely heavily on third-party service providers to help us deliver this program where and how it will be most effective. Every year we work with more than 10,000 immigrants, helping them settle and adapt to life in British Columbia.

Second is the provincial nominee program. The provincial nominee program is a valuable tool for B.C. to increase the economic benefits of immigration to the province by expediting the entry of immigrants who will make a significant contribution. On one side, the program is devoted to selecting and attracting business immigrants who are ready to contribute to B.C.'s growing economy.

[1740]

Since 2002 the business categories of the PNP have approved 111 business immigrants and their dependents, most of whom are here already investing in B.C. and creating jobs. If these new immigrants reach all of these business targets, British Columbia will see over \$97 million in new investment and the creation of 683 new jobs as a result of the program. The other side of the BCPNP program is a tool that allows B.C. employers to fill critical skill shortages in the province. It expedites the admission of highly skilled immigrants who can work in areas where we are facing skill shortages.

Since the inception of the program, 841 highly skilled applicants have been approved as provincial nominees. When we include their dependents, that number rises to over 2,000. Some of the leading sectors using the PNP include health, education, high technology, information technology and skilled trades. Of these skilled workers a full 25 percent are destined to areas outside of greater Vancouver.

I would also like to talk about B.C. anti-racism and multiculturalism programs. When the government actively recruits immigrants for the experience, skills and investment potential they can bring to the country, it is also important to support them once they are here. That is one of the reasons B.C. has a comprehensive anti-racism and multiculturalism program. We usually run between 15 and 20 anti-racism and multicultural programs each year across the province. We offer them through community partnerships, and 16 communities in B.C. are involved in critical response programs. We also actively promote the social, cultural and economic benefits of diversity.

On Valentine's Day, just a few days ago, I took part in a day-long dialogue on multiculturalism at the Wosk Centre in Vancouver. I spent a day with representatives from ethnic community associations, settlement and adaptation agencies, education stakeholders and business organizations. That was a wonderful opportunity for the province and stakeholders in the community to work together with the view to create an action plan of shared responsibility on multiculturalism.

I am very pleased that participants spoke their hearts openly at the dialogue. Students of Sir Charles

Tupper Secondary School said that the Jomar Lanot tragedy has brought them much closer together in school. Teachers, counsellors and the school principal have all worked hard together to educate students and improve racial harmony among students.

I attended a play in the school. It showed how racial discrimination could be avoided if we are able to trace through the mindset and families of the students. Dr. Jan Walls, the chair of the B.C. Multicultural Advisory Council, said to me, when referring to the promotion of multiculturalism: "It is important to put it in your heart first. Then this will pass on to the families, schools, communities and the whole country." He quoted exactly what Confucius said over 1,000 years ago. This ties in with our saying that it takes the entire village to raise a child. We need to start asking ourselves: what have you done to promote multiculturalism? What might you do differently? The success depends very much on you — in your daily life, in your thinking and in your own behaviour.

[1745]

I would like to talk about the B.C. Skills Connect for Immigrants. As I mentioned earlier, British Columbia is keenly interested in attracting immigrants who have skills and experience to our economy. We are also providing support for them, making it easier for new immigrants to move more quickly into jobs that match their qualifications.

This spring we will introduce B.C. Skills Connect for Immigrants, as announced by the Premier last weekend. It is a new program that will help immigrants figure out the complex labour market entry system. It will help them overcome language barriers and difficulties getting their credentials recognized. For too long, many immigrants have been frustrated by long waiting periods before they can work in the areas for which they are well trained. This program will help them find work and will help B.C. businesses find employees.

The program is part of a new immigration labour-market partnership branch that will provide more support for employers, regulatory bodies and professional and trade associations, making it easier to recognize and utilize the skills that immigrants bring. I have great confidence in this new initiative. We have been doing similar work since 2001, and our track record is impressive.

However, we need more doctors, more nurses, more health professionals and many other tradespeople. To help alleviate this need, we will do the following for the immigrants: first, a preresidency orientation pilot project that introduces foreign-trained doctors to the B.C. medical system, helping them to be more successful in their residencies; second, an assessment tool that helps nurses and nurse practitioners from other countries to demonstrate their skills and knowledge for employment in British Columbia. Third, we have de-

veloped occupational fact sheets for foreign-trained nurses, teachers, engineers and accountants, and we have developed an on-line employers' resource to help in recruiting and retaining immigrant employees.

Much of what we do in British Columbia has been negotiated under the Canada-B.C. immigration agreement. Last April we signed the second five-year agreement with the federal government. Under this agreement, B.C. is responsible for the design, administration and delivery of settlement and English-language services. The federal government provides \$37 million per year to this program plus an extra \$735,000 for enhanced labour market language training.

New initiatives under this agreement include: increasing immigration to smaller cities and communities in British Columbia so that small and rural communities will share the benefits of immigrants in the areas of creating more job opportunities, more investments, and arts and culture enrichment; and expediting the processing of international students who want to attend public post-secondary institutions in the province, as more British Columbians will be retiring in the coming decade. All this will help create wealth for all British Columbians and increase the long-term growth of the GDP of our province.

Before I close, I'm pleased to say that I have always been proud to be a member of this government; to help make positive changes in our society; and to work with the thousands of talented, dedicated and committed citizens who work tirelessly to better our neighbourhoods and our society at large. This budget highlights the achievements and success we have reached together and outlines the government's commitments to this province and its amazing people.

[1750]

I've never been prouder to be a British Columbian, and I expect that this will only continue to grow as we participate in the phenomenal growth of our province. I see a bright future for this province, and it is an honour to have an opportunity to work with so many British Columbians to help make it happen. Thank you.

Noting the hour, I would like to move adjournment of debate.

Hon. P. Wong moved adjournment of debate.

Motion approved.

Hon. L. Reid moved adjournment of the House.

Motion approved.

Deputy Speaker: The House stands adjourned until 10 o'clock tomorrow.

The House adjourned at 5:51 p.m.