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**DEBATES OF THE
LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY**

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Thursday, March 5, 2009

Afternoon Sitting

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THE HONOURABLE BILL BARISOFF, SPEAKER

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LIEUTENANT-GOVERNOR
His Honour the Honourable Steven L. Point, OBC

FIFTH SESSION, 38TH PARLIAMENT

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Honourable Bill Barisoff

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THURSDAY, MARCH 5, 2009

The House met at 1:36 p.m.

[Mr. Speaker in the chair.]

Statements

MESSAGES FOR DANIEL JARVIS

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Members, the Minister of State for Childcare has a special introduction, I think.

Hon. L. Reid: Today I would ask every member of this House to join with me in wishing the member for North Vancouver–Seymour the speediest recovery possible. He's actually watching us as we speak. We were indeed wondering if this is the first time he might have been watching us on television, because the reality is that he is always here. He loves this place. He continues to serve this province with, I think, incredible energy and esteem. I would ask the House to join and wish him the speediest recovery possible. [Applause.]

M. Farnworth: Joining with the minister over the way, on this side of the House we'd just like to let the member for North Vancouver–Seymour know that having served with him since 1991, we really do miss your heckles in question period.

Mr. Speaker: I'm sure the member for North Vancouver–Seymour... We all wish him the very, very best. I'm sure that it won't be long, and he'll be back sitting in his chair doing the heckling that he's so primed for.

Hon. M. de Jong: I for one am appalled at the length he would go to, to solicit a standing ovation in this chamber, but I, too, would wish him well.

Introductions by Members

Hon. M. de Jong: A great day here at the Legislature. The Klahoose First Nation, represented by Chief Ken Brown, Councillor Kathy Francis, Councillor Jessie Louie and Elder Norman Harry, along with drummers, dancers, singers and 40 members of the community are here and were here earlier when we signed a historic incremental treaty agreement. I know that all members of the House would want to commemorate the importance of that occasion and welcome them here to this chamber.

K. Conroy: Yesterday one of our members had leave all day, and I believed when I granted him this leave, he had less than a stellar reason for the leave. I believe he was trying to avoid just this. So belatedly, I would like to

wish the member for Burnaby-Edmonds a very happy 60th birthday.

J. Les: It's a great pleasure for me this afternoon to introduce to members of the House Wade and Maureen Grant, who join us today. Just a few years ago Wade was my executive assistant, and it was during the time he worked here that he married Maureen. They're joined today by their son Eli as well, who is now six months old, and a very handsome and hale and hearty-looking fellow.

Since his time here Wade has gone on to bigger and better things. He is now the assistant general manager for the aboriginal pavilion at the 2010 Olympic and Paralympic Games. Would all members of the House join me in making Wade, Maureen and Eli very welcome.

[1340]

D. Cubberley: In the gallery with us today are 36 grades 10 and 11 social studies students from Claremont Secondary School, high on the ridge in sunny Cordova Bay in Saanich, accompanied by their teacher David Gardner and escorted by Jenny Newman and William Moore. Will the House please join me in making them welcome today.

Statements

MESSAGES FOR DANIEL JARVIS

J. Nuraney: Let me begin by wishing the member for North Vancouver–Seymour a happy and speedy recovery. I want to assure him that I'm keeping his desk clean and well dusted. Come back. We need you.

Introductions by Members

J. Nuraney: It's a great pleasure for me to introduce to you a group that is here with us in the Legislature, a group that I'm really proud of. They are the Bonsor Seniors. This group is represented here today by Mary Horton, Brenda Felker, Monica Robidoux, Alice McCann, Ralph George, Terry Jeffares, Inga Nielsen, Harvey Lee, Ken Couch, Chris Hildred, Vic Jones, Sam Naicker, Peter Tamin, Albert Lum, Sandra Keayes, Al Poole, Beverley Olsen, Keith Harris and Joyce Smith. I ask the House to please join me in making them feel very welcome.

D. Routley: Could the House help me welcome Les Hilliard. Les is the financial secretary of Local 8 of the PPWC and one of the employee-owners of Harmac mill.

Hon. M. Polak: It gives me a great deal of pleasure to introduce members from the B.C. Paraplegic Association today: Melanie Crombie, executive director;

Linda Annis, director of marketing and development; and Paralympic athletes Paul Gauthier, Daniel Wesley and Gary Cormack. They were all here today hosting a Vision Without Barriers luncheon for all members of the Legislature. Would the House please make them very welcome.

N. Simons: It is my pleasure and actually my honour to introduce two friends from the constituency of Powell River–Sunshine Coast. Sulsolwek, also known as Nancy Mitchell, is here. She was participating in the ceremony that honours the achievement of the Klahoose people. With her was Tlex-tan, also known as William Mitchell — both of whom I have the pleasure to hear at ceremonies in my riding and other places as well. Their voices are beautiful, and they resonate with the honour of their people. I'd like to make them most welcome in this House.

I'd also like to welcome the people from Klahoose territory who have travelled here, and I wish them safe travels. I would like to point out that in question period, sometimes we go at each other, and you'll notice that tempers flare and the words are sharp. But you can see by our recognition of the member for Burnaby–Edmonds' birthday and my friend from North Vancouver–Seymour that we deal with each other with civility and friendship outside this House. I just wanted to make sure they know that.

Statements

MESSAGES FOR DANIEL JARVIS

Hon. B. Penner: Like a number of other members, I would like to extend my best wishes to the member for North Vancouver–Seymour.

Dan, I understand that you're feeling better, but I'm worried that you won't feel better after watching what happens here. You may want to get some advice from your doctor before you continue to watch.

Dan is affectionately known as Dapper Dan, among other things. Dan, I hope you approve of my new suit, courtesy of my wife. I took her advice.

Introductions by Members

R. Chouhan: I would also like to welcome my friends from Bonsor Seniors. The group is also known as Burnaby Partners in Seniors Wellness.

In addition, I would like to welcome Mr. Sav Dhaliwal, councillor and chair of the Burnaby Parks, Recreation and Cultural Commission. Please join me to welcome all.

R. Hawes: I just want to add something to what the Minister of Healthy Living and Sport had to say with respect to the Paralympians that we have here in the gallery.

[1345]

Mr. Paul Gauthier will be competing for us in 2010 in bocce. He has brought home gold and bronze medals. He won't be in 2010, but he will be in the next Olympics. He's brought home gold and bronze from the Beijing Olympics.

Gary Cormack has numerous medals, including a gold medal at Torino, and he will be curling for us in 2010. Daniel Wesley is now coaching but has won numerous medals, including gold at both the Summer Olympics and the Winter Paralympic Games.

We really do owe a huge amount of respect and gratitude to these athletes for representing us. As such, I would ask the House to truly recognize these fine people.

L. Krog: I might say that the endorsement of the Minister of Environment's suit might be the only kindness he'll get from the House today.

I'm delighted to introduce to the House today someone who's been here many times before, and that's Arnie Bercov, the president of PPWC Local 8 from Nanaimo. Would the House please make him welcome.

C. Trevena: The Minister of Aboriginal Relations and Reconciliation recognized the importance of community at today's signing ceremony with the Klahoose, and I'd like to echo that. I'd also like to recognize the importance of the council in the negotiations, in particular Kathy Francis, the former chief councillor treaty negotiator, who has spent, as she says, her whole adult life on this.

Kathy is a woman of true integrity, honesty and commitment. It's a privilege to know her and to work with her when the opportunity and the occasion arises. Kathy is in the gallery along with members of the Klahoose First Nation and her husband, Hardy. Again, I would like the House to make them all very welcome.

Introduction and First Reading of Bills

CONSUMER PROTECTION IN TICKET SALES ACT, 2009

S. Herbert presented a bill intitled Consumer Protection in Ticket Sales Act, 2009.

S. Herbert: Today I move a bill entitled Consumer Protection in Ticket Sales Act, 2009, be introduced and read a first time now.

I bring this bill to the House as British Columbians want the predatory practices of large ticket resellers like Ticketmaster and its TicketsNow website to stop. We've seen price gouging which can jack prices up 700 percent or more for concerts or sports games. This puts these events out of reach of average folks and many of us, and

it is unfair. When one company can buy up all the tickets and then resell them for massive profit, we know something has to change.

With this bill, the price on the ticket will be the price you pay. No more so-called convenience fees or massive inflation in prices. This bill will bring us into line with Ontario, Manitoba and Alberta, and I ask all members of this House for their support.

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

Mr. Speaker: First we've got to do the first reading.

Motion approved.

S. Herbert: I move second reading, and people could do the third, too, if they like. Maybe the Attorney General will join me.

I would like to move that the bill be placed on the orders of the day for second reading at the next sitting of this House.

Bill M202, Consumer Protection in Ticket Sales Act, 2009, 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)

BURNABY PARTNERS IN SENIORS WELLNESS

R. Chouhan: It gives me great pleasure to rise today to talk about a great program in Burnaby. The program is the Burnaby Partners in Seniors Wellness. It has provided health and wellness benefits to our seniors for over 20 years. It is a unique and innovative program and offers a cost savings to the health care system.

It operates in the four Burnaby seniors centres. Every year it provides over 13,000 therapeutic, counselling and educational services, over 3,500 blood pressure monitoring services, foot care, weight control, massage therapy, exercise, fall prevention and housing information.

[1350]

It creates age-friendly communities. It mobilizes and supports volunteerism, and it promotes healthy living. This program is an excellent example of the kind of collaborative effort that is needed to help keep seniors healthy and out of emergency rooms. It is a partnership that involves the city of Burnaby, the Burnaby Parks, Recreation and Culture Commission, seniors societies and retired medical professionals.

It's a very cost-effective program. The total cost is a mere \$2.40 per visit, approximately. Given the low cost as well as the preventative and early diagnostic focus,

it has saved significant health care dollars. I strongly believe that this program is one that deserves ongoing sustainable funding and full support from both sides of the House.

Today we have some members of the Burnaby Partners in Seniors Wellness visiting the Legislature. I hope they will be able to meet with the Minister of Health and the Minister of Healthy Living and Sport. I wish them all the very best and support their efforts to get ongoing sustainable funding for this wonderful program helping seniors in Burnaby.

BONSOR SENIORS SOCIETY

J. Nuraney: I rise today to speak about the Bonsor Seniors Society of Burnaby. It is a society that is very active, and it is a vibrant group of over 100 seniors affecting the lives of thousands of seniors in our area, in Burnaby. They play a very key role not only in the lives of their members but in the community of the city at large.

I've had the privilege of knowing and working with them for the past several years and continue to be amazed by their energy and eagerness to contribute to the society, giving their experience, skills and talents for the benefit of the community at large.

They organize and manage programs for their members that include blood pressure testing, education sessions relating to health care, fall prevention, peer counselling and general wellness. Apart from this valuable activity, they also reach out to the other members of the community, such as the new immigrants, by providing top-notch parenting and literacy programs. They help them with their school needs and bring them together to celebrate diversity.

It is not often that we recognize the immense asset we have in our seniors, and we do not often use their experience, skills, talents and professionalism. Bonsor Seniors make available this invaluable asset for the benefit of the community, and I applaud what they do.

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

C. Trevena: Sunday marks International Women's Day, the day when in many parts of the world women are celebrated and recognized. It's a day on which women's rights are marked and women's issues highlighted. The United Nations theme this year is "Women and men united against violence against women and girls."

Violence against women can be interpreted in many different ways. There is what we all recognize: wife battering, physical and emotional violence against a spouse — the dark underside of more relationships than most people realize or would like to admit.

We all say that we want to do something about this — to stop violence against women. Not to just make it illegal — it already is that — but to make it culturally

unacceptable. But are women not doubly victimized when as victims of violence they're not able to get the legal aid they need to pursue any civil case? Are women not doubly victimized when they're forced to leave their homes? Thank goodness for temporary respite and transition houses, but then what? Are women not doubly victimized when they've had to face a waiting list for counselling after they've been raped?

Violence against women is not just physical or emotional violence in a relationship or rape or sexual assault. I'd argue that restricting access for income assistance is violence against women. Saying to a woman that when her child is three years old, she has to find work or face losing her welfare — that is violence against women.

A welfare system which impoverishes women, which forces them into destitution before they're even eligible to apply and which bars them from accessing education — that is violence against women.

[1355]

I've talked in this House about the trafficking of women. Trafficking is violence against women and girls. Under-age marriage in places like Bountiful — that is violence against women and girls. Women in the provincial prison system who have their babies taken away from them — that is violence against women.

As we approach this International Women's Day, let's look to our own society and see what we can do to truly end violence against women.

70th ANNIVERSARY OF NORTH SHORE NEIGHBOURHOOD HOUSE

K. Whittred: This year North Shore Neighbourhood House is celebrating 70 years of serving the community. Founded in 1939 by a small group of local residents, the goal of this new neighbourhood house was to create an accessible place for youth. This was to expand on the already popular Beattie's residence where many neighbourhood kids gathered regularly for activities such as sewing and building model airplanes.

Neighbourhood House has since expanded and developed into an all-around community house for the neighbourhood. With programs for children, youth, adults and seniors alike, North Shore Neighbourhood House has aptly been described as the heart of the community, and so it is.

With a strong sense in grass roots, Neighbourhood House continues to address the changing needs of the community. Programs such as supported child development, pregnant and parenting teens, a whole variety of seniors programs including wellness and a recent program called grandparent connections, which helps grandparents caring for their grandchildren — all address today's needs in the community.

The staff and volunteers that make up North Shore Neighbourhood House are, in reality, a dedicated group.

They approach their work with incredible heart and deserve special kudos.

Once again, I offer my most heartfelt congratulations to North Shore Neighbourhood House on 70 years of incredible work in the North Shore community. May your good work continue for generations to come.

NISGA'A NEW YEAR CELEBRATION

R. Austin: Last Friday I had the honour to attend, along with hundreds of others, the annual Nisga'a new year's celebration, or *Hobiye* as it is called. This event takes place at the end of February just before the oolichans' arrival signals the beginning of spring.

It was an incredible experience to witness literally hundreds of visitors to the community of Laxgalts'ap, or Greenville. Laxgalts'ap means "village on village," an acknowledgment that this community was built on previous Nisga'a settlements that have existed there for over 500 years.

Along with others, I partook of some of the most incredible hospitality, which the Nisga'a are famous for, including the serving of a traditional Nisga'a meal to all who were there. There were so many in attendance that once all the banquet tables were full, people and children then filled up the bleachers of their community hall.

After dinner the tables were cleared, and the dancing and drumming began. To see so many first nations from all over the northwest of the province is a wonderful sight, but once those drums got going, it was truly a spiritual experience. Not only were there groups from the four Nisga'a communities, but there were also groups from the Tsimshian, the Gitksan and the Haisla of Kitamaat village, proving once again that the resurgence of aboriginal culture that is currently taking place is alive and well in northwest B.C.

The atmosphere was one of joyous festivity, with some mothers even dancing with small children attached to their backs, quietly content to take in the raucous celebrations.

I want to thank the people of Laxgalts'ap and all the organizers for a job well done and to invite all members of this House to think about attending this unique cultural event in the future.

All that remains, Mr. Speaker, is for me to wish everyone here a happy Nisga'a new year — *Hobiye*.

SEISMIC UPGRADE OF WEST VANCOUVER SECONDARY SCHOOL

R. Sultan: A couple weeks ago I had the pleasure of announcing \$1.3 million in provincial funding to seismically upgrade West Vancouver Secondary School. This is one example of approximately 100 similar seismic projects across the province either completed, underway or soon to be launched. I toured the school's gymnasium

— part of the scheduled upgrade. I was shown a massive wooden beam which had already failed, fortunately not catastrophically.

[1400]

Upgrading involves new concrete footings for plywood shear walls, floor reinforcements, exterior wall cladding and stronger connections between roof, floors and walls. All such work conforms to the design recommendations of B.C.'s Association of Professional Engineers and Geoscientists peer-review committee for the creation of a performance-based approach in assessing schools.

Prominent on that task force were Andy Mill, P.Eng.; Dr. Carlos Ventura, UBC professor of earthquake engineering; and John Robertson, the chief building inspector for the city of Vancouver. This committee received the APEGBC president's award for distinguished public service.

As a plus, new provincially funded seismic upgrades, such as this one, will incorporate B.C. wood, helping our forest industry.

Not even an earthquake scientist can predict when the big one will hit, but hit it surely will. It's reassuring that school boards across the province are systematically working their way through their priority list.

Oral Questions

GOVERNMENT ACTION ON HOMELESSNESS

J. Kwan: The Auditor General's report released today condemns this government's record on the homelessness file, and it is telling this government what most British Columbians already knew — that this government failed to properly assess the magnitude of the problem, that the government failed to prevent homelessness from increasing, that the government failed to put in a comprehensive plan to address the homelessness crisis and that this government failed to be accountable.

Will the Minister of Housing do the right thing, admit that he was wrong and do what the public, local governments and now the Auditor General are calling for: develop a comprehensive plan to end the homelessness crisis?

Hon. R. Coleman: Homelessness is an extremely complex issue, and we appreciate the audit team's efforts in trying to understand it, in both the fundamentals and the nuances. We also appreciate the audit's recognition that the province has initiated a number of best practices and is taking an evidence-based approach to addressing homelessness in British Columbia.

Audits are part of what instruct us with regards to going forward. We have, as the member knows, initiated an integrated plan with regards to how we'll work in five significant communities across the province of British Columbia, in addition to the other things we're doing.

I think this is really about, more than anything else, this House understanding that really the homelessness is about people. I can give you statistics, and each statistic is a human being. It's a human being whose life is being turned around, because we're concentrating on homelessness, mental health and addiction by putting supports in buildings that we're buying and building so that we can address the issue for humanity across the province of British Columbia.

Mr. Speaker: Member has a supplemental.

J. Kwan: The minister knew that this report was coming, and two days ago he engaged in damage control. He made an announcement and said that he was going to be the czar to end homelessness. In the meanwhile, the report comes forward and says that homelessness is actually increasing. The report: "Despite putting in place many best practice strategies and programs, government has not been successful in reducing homelessness."

The Auditor General's report goes on to say: "The continuing increase in the number of homeless counted suggests a lack of success in managing homelessness, let alone reducing it. When there are no clear goals or performance targets, accountability for results is missing. How will we know we are successful if we have not identified success?"

My question to the minister is this. Is he afraid to commit to a target and time line to end the homelessness crisis? Because he knows that his government would not be able to deliver on that promise.

[1405]

Hon. R. Coleman: I'll give you some targets and some results, hon. Member. Some 4,600 people in the last 18 months in British Columbia have been connected to housing and supports with outreaching across the province....

I know you want to make them just statistics, but let's talk about an individual person.

Interjections.

Mr. Speaker: Continue, Minister.

Hon. R. Coleman: Let's just describe one person, a young woman whose mother said to us: "I lost my daughter. One of my children went one way; one child went the other way."

One child had 82 visits to hospital in a year, was in and out of police custody and other health professionals, was allowed to move into a single-room-occupancy hotel that we renovated and put in supports for, and in the last year had three visits to hospital. That's a measurement, particularly when the mother says to you: "I got my daughter back."

The reality is that we are doing yeoman service in this province with regard to homelessness. We have the most aggressive strategy in Canadian history. We have invested three times more money than that government ever did with regards to people that need help in this province, and we will continue to drive the homeless agenda in the province of B.C.

Mr. Speaker: The member has a further supplemental.

J. Kwan: The city of Vancouver's homeless count shows that street-level homelessness has increased by 365 percent under this government's watch. It has happened while this minister is the Minister of Housing.

The Auditor General's report says: "There is no provincial homelessness plan with clear goals and objectives." Page 2: "All indications are that homelessness is still growing." Page 34: "We recommend that government improve its reporting related to homelessness so that the public and Legislature can understand its extent and whether or not progress is being made."

Does the minister seriously think that his ad hoc approach in addressing the homelessness crisis is better than what the Auditor General is recommending?

Hon. R. Coleman: Let's talk about Vancouver, since the member opposite brought it up. The member opposite wrote me a couple years ago and begged me to buy the Carl Rooms in Vancouver, one single-room-occupancy hotel.

We have bought 23. We're renovating them. We're putting in supports for people that are homeless and suffering from mental health and addictions, and we're getting results. We also took a shelter space in B.C. and invested \$41 million — 24-7, 365 days a year.

Let's not take my words for it. Let's take....

Interjections.

Hon. R. Coleman: Actually, hon. Member, I would wonder how many people from that particular office went down and looked in the face of a homeless person in the city of Vancouver. But this person has.

Interjections.

Mr. Speaker: Members.

Hon. R. Coleman: "I think we're finally making progress. We have two levels of government at the city and at the province where we're seeing quite firm political will to put the housing in place to resolve homelessness. I saw fewer people in the streets sleeping outside, and this is wonderful to me."

Do you know who that is? That's a lady in Vancouver who's been working with homelessness for 30 years, Judy

Graves, in the city of Vancouver. She believes we're on the right track in Vancouver. She believes we're working in the right direction, and she supports the Premier.

Interjections.

Mr. Speaker: Members.

[1410]

D. Chudnovsky: The Auditor General states: "We expected government to have in place a comprehensive plan with clear measurable goals and objectives on how homelessness will be addressed." He goes on: "We concluded that government does not have a comprehensive plan for providing clear direction for addressing homelessness."

Surely the government didn't just realize when they first saw the Auditor General's report that there's a crisis of homelessness in the province. When we're facing the worst crisis of homelessness since the Great Depression more than 70 years ago, why doesn't the government already have in place the comprehensive plan the Auditor General calls for? Why is it all about damage control?

Hon. R. Coleman: I'm proud to be part of a government that's been the leader in Canada in dealing with homelessness, mental health and addictions. I'm proud to....

Interjections.

Mr. Speaker: Just take your seat, Minister. Continue, Minister.

Hon. R. Coleman: So 2001 — 1,300 units of supportive housing for people in the province of British Columbia suffering from mental health, homelessness and addictions. Today — 4,410, with 1,200 more in development.

Some people might want to measure things certain ways — by cutting ribbons and thinking they're being heroes. Me, I believe in the 42 women that are being changed in one SRO, whose lives are being changed in the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver because we developed a relationship with the Portland Hotel Society on a facility so those women can flee abuse, flee the sex trade, deal with their addictions and mental illness. That's the way you measure it. You measure it in changing people's lives.

Mr. Speaker: The member has a supplemental.

D. Chudnovsky: The Auditor General writes: "We expected government to have included high-level measures of success in its...strategic plan or in a separate... plan specifically addressing homelessness." He reports, however, that the government "presents no measures or targets for homelessness."

Again, everybody in the province, including this Premier and this minister, knows we have an appalling crisis of homelessness. Why hasn't the government set out clear targets and time lines for dealing with the crisis?

Hon. R. Coleman: You know, a woman wrote me recently. She has six children. She was moving....

Interjections.

Hon. R. Coleman: This isn't an isolated incident, Member. This is one of the 8,000 people who are at risk of homelessness who get assistance under the rental assistance program in the province of British Columbia that you guys opposed and you voted against.

This is a mother with six children who was going to move into her station wagon, and she was able to access the rent assistance program. She came to see me recently and told me about her employment and her goals and her future and how happy her kids were and how healthy they were and how good they were doing in school.

That's how I measure it. I measure it with people — not with statistics but with people whose lives you change for the better. If they don't like that, that's just too bad.

MINIMUM WAGE

K. Conroy: The Auditor General clearly says in this report that one of the most common causes of homelessness is low wages relative to living costs. We need to know: will the minister finally admit that this government's ideological refusal to help British Columbia's lowest earners is adding to the homelessness crisis, and will he stand today and support a raise to the minimum wage?

Interjections.

Mr. Speaker: Just wait, Minister.

[1415]

Hon. R. Coleman: In British Columbia any family making under \$35,000 a year can get assistance with their rent anywhere in the province today. Almost 8,000 families access that. In that member's own riding there are 17 families in Castlegar and 19 families in Trail that access the rent assistance program confidentially within the community — nobody knows. They can have quality of life and self-respect for themselves by having affordability in housing, and that member voted against that.

Interjections.

Mr. Speaker: We're not continuing until there's silence. Members.

Member has a supplemental.

K. Conroy: Even those people deserve a living wage. Even the province of Alberta is raising their minimum wage. Yet this minister refuses to face reality.

We're not alone in calling for a raise to minimum wage. The president of the White Rock Chamber of Commerce said in February that he supports raising the minimum wage, saying: "It's been frozen for some time, and to try and survive on minimum wage is extremely difficult."

Again to the minister: will he make a real commitment to fight homelessness and raise the minimum wage?

Hon. R. Coleman: I'll tell you the commitment to eliminate homelessness. It's a budget that's over tripled in the last five years. It's 4,600 people connected with housing and supports because we have outreach workers in 41 communities across the province of British Columbia. It's 7,700 families but also 15,000-plus seniors on Shelter Aid for Elderly Renters in the province of British Columbia getting assistance with their rent. It's housing with supports in 2001 being 1,300 and housing with supports being over 4,400 today, and 1,200 new units coming on.

That's fighting homelessness, and the reality is that these guys don't like this. They don't like the fact that in the communities across the province of British Columbia, whether it be in Quesnel or Prince George or Kamloops or Penticton or in the Kootenays or down in the Lower Mainland, we have made the most significant investment in housing for people with mental health addictions in Canadian history.

REGULATION OF SEPTIC SYSTEMS

B. Simpson: For the past three years the opposition has been warning this government that they are threatening the health and safety of our drinking water in this province by the privatization and deregulation of our septic system installations. Today another report is condemning this government, just like we saw the Auditor General's report condemning them for homelessness.

This report, by health professionals, states: "The septic regulations are the worst legislation ever written in British Columbia." Yet last year, last spring, when we asked the Minister of Health to address this concern, the Minister of Health said that it seems to be all working just fine. Does the minister still believe that these regulations are working just fine?

Hon. M. Polak: I'm pleased that as a result of *The Vancouver Sun* article today that the members opposite have taken a renewed interest in the sewer system regulation in British Columbia, an interest that they certainly didn't show for ten years when they were in government.

I'm very pleased to report that the health protection branch has been working collaboratively, not only

with the Union of B.C. Municipalities but also with the authors of this report. In fact, the majority of recommendations contained within this report originated within our health protection branch. Work in order to achieve and resolve those implementation issues is already well underway. We've had great progress with UBCM, and we intend to continue to provide the best protection for drinking water for British Columbians across this province.

[1420]

Mr. Speaker: Member has a supplemental.

B. Simpson: The minister should go get a briefing on how many times we've raised this issue in the Legislature, in estimates debate, outside the Legislature. We've been calling on this government to address this issue for the last four years.

Unlike this government, we have actually worked with the coalition that put this report forward today, and here's what the report says that belies the truth of what the minister just said. "It's the worst legislation ever written in British Columbia. Experts are now warning that the number of poorly designed systems has skyrocketed under this new regime. The self-regulatory system established for technicians is profoundly deficient, and B.C. taxpayers are being forced to pay huge sums for septic systems that will fail."

Deregulation and privatization of something that is going to affect the drinking water. This report states today... Today it says that if we don't fix this failed law, we could see mini-Walkertons all over this province. Will the Minister of Health stand up and commit today to re-regulate this industry immediately and make sure we don't kill anybody by this deregulation?

Interjections.

Mr. Speaker: Just take your seat for a second, Minister. Minister.

Hon. M. Polak: It is shameful that the member would attempt to fearmonger in such a manner when it comes to something as serious as the drinking water for British Columbians in this province.

While the opposition wants to play politics with this, the health protection....

Interjections.

Hon. M. Polak: I know the members opposite would like to heckle and jeer, but perhaps it would be more constructive to consider the serious nature of the protection of drinking water in British Columbia.

Let me tell you the actions that we have taken thus far. We have provided for \$16 million to support our drinking

water action plan, \$21 million to support the living rivers trust fund and \$120 million to more than 80 communities through the community water improvement program — initiatives that those members voted against.

A. Dix: The minister doesn't seem to find it shameful that, in the protection of public drinking water, the government has set up a system that is, to quote from the report, a "classic case study in regulatory failure." It is the worst regulation ever written in British Columbia.

Hon. K. Falcon: Give us an example.

A. Dix: The Minister of Transportation wants an example. I refer him to page 39 of the report, where it details how public health inspectors are stopped from protecting health. They are not allowed to stop the installation of septic tanks that could or would pollute the local water supply. That is shameful.

Does the minister find it acceptable that health inspectors are being stopped by government diktat from protecting B.C.'s drinking water?

Hon. M. Polak: Well, let me tell you what the members opposite found acceptable when they were in government. They found it acceptable....

Interjections.

Mr. Speaker: Continue, Minister.

Hon. M. Polak: They found it acceptable to place absolutely no requirements whatsoever onto installers of wastewater systems — not one. As a result of the work of our health protection branch — working with UBCM, working with the Applied Science Technologists and Technicians of B.C — we now have in British Columbia 600 certified professionals.

[1425]

Let me leave no doubt that our work is ongoing to make sure we have the best protection of drinking water in all of Canada. I want to read from a letter that we received from the Ombudsman in response...

Interjections.

Mr. Speaker: Members. Continue.

Hon. M. Polak: ...to our work in responding to her recommendations around drinking water. She says: "I applaud the efforts of the ministry in ensuring the recommendations are implemented, in providing updates to my office. I thank you for your and your ministry's continued commitment to improving drinking water safety in British Columbia." We intend to continue.

Mr. Speaker: The member has a supplemental.

A. Dix: One inspector — and the minister maybe will read the report; we'll be hopeful — accounts e-mailing his supervisor to say this: "If retention of my job requires that I sign/stamp this, I will do so. Please understand that this does present a moral dilemma. I shouldn't knowingly assist in the creation of a substandard sewerage system that will likely be a health hazard." How is that acceptable?

Now I know that the minister was left behind this...

Interjections.

Mr. Speaker: Members.

A. Dix: ...septic disaster from the Minister of Health, but when will she act to change this law so B.C.'s drinking water is protected?

Hon. M. Polak: Let's talk about what we've done. What we've done is provide for 600 certified professionals. In contrast to the ten years when these folks were in government, a time when anyone was able to install a sewerage system, we now require that only a certified professional can do that.

We recognize that in implementing these regulations, it's important for us to work with communities. Rural communities have had challenges in trying to come up to the standards set for those installing wastewater systems in B.C.

So I am proud. I am proud of the progress we've made in working with the Union of B.C. Municipalities, with whom we've signed an MOU as of September. I am also pleased that with respect to the recommendations in the report, the majority of them, if the member had listened to my first response, originated in the offices of our health protection branch, who work collaboratively with the UBCM, the technologists and the authors of this report.

FUTURE OF HARMAC MILL

L. Krog: The Minister of Forests has stated publicly that the new management structure of Harmac mill may be a model for the future of the industry. However, that mill's future is actually in this minister's hands. It's a straight-up question. Will the Minister of Forests commit today that this government will indemnify Harmac's historical environmental liability so that it can continue to function and provide hundreds of jobs in my community?

Hon. P. Bell: We've been working very closely with the management team, the employees and the owners at Harmac to make sure they have a long-term, viable

future. It is a very challenging point in time, but what the member opposite is requesting would mean a \$30 million to \$50 million liability. That would open up the door across this province. We would have to offer the same to all of the pulp industry. That is not a reasonable request.

Mr. Speaker: The member has a supplemental.

L. Krog: It may not be a very reasonable request, but this government has helped out its friends and insiders all over the place. So I'm speaking on behalf of my constituents. If we can give away our railway, we can save the jobs at Harmac in Nanaimo.

This is a model operation. It's running at reduced costs. It provides hope and some optimism for an industry that this government has watched fall into the toilet, frankly. So I say to this minister today: will he do the right thing today and commit here in this House that he'll indemnify that long-term environmental liability and save Harmac?

Hon. P. Bell: I suppose I should expect that coming from a member of a government who authored the destiny of Skeena Cellulose and the significant investment that was made in that particular facility — half a billion dollars of taxpayers' money for an additional year of operation.

[1430]

So it shouldn't surprise me that that member would be advocating for another bailout of that nature. But you know what? The employees at Harmac have it right. They're working hard in that organization to make sure that mill does have a long-term, viable future. We have made significant changes that will help the viability of that operation, including the removal of 50 percent of the school property taxes at that and all other pulp mills in the province, to treat them fairly — roughly a \$1.25 million savings in each of those operations.

On top of that, the removal of the corporate capital tax that we did in our first term...

Interjections.

Hon. P. Bell: I'm sorry the members opposite keep calling time here. If they're going to ask the question, they should take the time to listen to the answer. This is a government that believes in the long-term sustainability of that industry.

D. Routley: This government starts its fires, and then it arrives with a pail at the last minute and expects a medal of honour. It is creating job loss. In Mackenzie they inherited a liability because the mill went down. In Port Alice, after repeated pleas from the member for North Island, they finally responded and took over those liabilities for that mill.

What's different about this mill in Nanaimo — Harmac — and those workers? The minister himself says it's the model for the future, and yet he sits by and watches as they struggle. They have a business plan that will keep them working, keep those families employed. Will he today stand up and take the action that he's going to have to anyway if they go under? It has been proven in Mackenzie. He had to take it over there, with no jobs.

Will he today stand up and do what he did in Port Alice and do what he did in Mackenzie — do the right thing and indemnify that mill, keep it operating, indemnify them from liabilities that are not their own making, help those workers today?

Interjections.

Mr. Speaker: Members.
Take your seat for a second.

Interjections.

Mr. Speaker: Members. Members on both sides.
Minister.

Hon. P. Bell: I guess we've just heard a policy position from the members opposite. I think what they're saying is the government should subsidize heavy industry by removing all the environmental liabilities that are associated with it. Is that the new policy of the NDP opposite? Because that's what we're hearing.

This government believes in a level playing field across the province. If they would have taken the time to understand what's going on in Mackenzie.... There has been no environmental indemnity.

Interjections.

Mr. Speaker: Members.

[End of question period.]

Hon. J. McIntyre: I seek leave to make an introduction.

Mr. Speaker: Proceed.

Introductions by Members

Hon. J. McIntyre: Today in the members' gallery we have special visitors from Israel. Her Excellency Miriam Ziv, the recently appointed Ambassador of Israel to Canada, is making her very first official visit to Victoria. She's accompanied by her husband Mr. Ariel Kenet. Please join me in giving them a very, very warm welcome to this House and to British Columbia.

K. Whittred: I seek leave to make an introduction.

Mr. Speaker: Proceed.

K. Whittred: In the gallery is a woman who works very hard to record our words for posterity. It is Jo-Anne Kern, who is director of Hansard Services. With her is her daughter Tara Brookman. Would you join me in making them very welcome.

Orders of the Day

Hon. M. de Jong: I call continued second reading debate on Bill 5, the Supply Act (No. 1), 2009.

[1435]

Second Reading of Bills

SUPPLY ACT (No. 1), 2009
(continued)

Mr. Speaker: Can members, if they're leaving the chamber, please leave quietly.

B. Ralston: I want to briefly resume my place and continue and make a few remarks in conclusion on Bill 5. As I said this morning in debating this bill, this is an unusual step by the government in the sense that it prevents the opposition and the Legislature from debating the main estimates. It's unusually long.

Typically, interim supply is two months or three months. This is for five months, and the ambit of this bill really prevents — and of course I want to respect previous rulings that Speakers have made on the ambit of debate on this particular bill — full discussion of any line-by-line items.

There are real questions that British Columbians have, that the opposition has about the budget, and it looks as though by bringing this bill forward at this time the government doesn't intend to proceed further with budget debate. The government doesn't intend to use the time that's available this month to debate main estimates and the way in which they're debated.

Those who are familiar with the process will be aware that there's an opportunity in the debate of main estimates for individual members to pose questions to the minister. The minister is assisted by his or her staff, and that's often a time when there's some illumination of policy concerns. Where there's a frank exchange of views, there's an opportunity to debate at length. I think, and I'm sure most members of the public would think, that that's the sort of job that legislators should be doing, and that's the kind of good policy results that will be achieved by that process.

Indeed, that's a time-honoured process that has served parliamentary institutions around the world

very well. Yet by this introduction of interim supply, that opportunity to debate in that way will be closed off. So the very principles on which parliamentary democracy is based, where people come to the parliament to have their grievances heard prior to supply being voted, will be avoided.

The government is obviously anxious to cut debate off, to get out on the election trail, not to have a full debate of their budget, and obviously that's something that we would welcome. There are a number of assumptions on which the budget is based, which certainly, in the current economic context, are changing rapidly.

[S. Hammell in the chair.]

It would be a good opportunity and an important opportunity, a valuable opportunity, to have that debate with members of the government, particularly prior to an election, in order that the issues are very clear and clearly before people when they go to cast their ballot in a couple of months from now.

Regrettably, at this very early stage in this session, only several weeks after tabling a budget, the government has tabled this bill. I expect that members on this side will want to fully debate this interim supply bill, but again, understanding the general nature that is forced upon us by the debate.

As I've said earlier, there are a number of questions. I know a number of members here have many questions, many concerns that they would wish to air, wish to have ministers respond to — whether it's the Minister of Forests, whether it's the Minister of the Environment, whether it's the Minister of Health or the Minister of Finance.

All those questions in the estimates debate would be at play, and there would be an opportunity to have that discussion. But by tabling this Bill 5, the government basically is authorized to continue spending money without any substantive public discussion, any real debate, any line-by-line debate on those spending plans, which is the very essence of what parliamentary debate is all about.

[1440]

Control of supply — that is, the spending of the money — is the very basic act, the essential part, that government does, and approval of supply is the very essence, the most important act that the Legislature engages in. So it's regrettable indeed that the government has chosen to proceed in this way.

I want to make clear on the record, if I haven't already, that I oppose the tabling of this interim supply bill at this point. I speak strongly against it, and I expect my colleagues will join me in continuing to speak against it as long as the rules permit us to do so.

With that, I'll conclude my remarks and give way to the next speaker.

L. Krog: I'm delighted today to follow the member for Surrey-Whalley, who has spoken so eloquently on what is absolutely fundamental to what it is we do in this place. Absolutely fundamental.

What we do is grant the government — Her Majesty the Queen — the authority to spend the people's money. It's historic. It's a fascinating process. It is the fundamental process of a democratic society that the people, through its elected representatives, are able to determine what happens to their taxes, what happens to the revenue collected by the state on behalf of the Sovereign, who represents all British Columbians.

I must say today that I was a bit surprised when the Minister of Finance got up to speak. I had expected in second reading debate that the minister might wish to spend some time explaining the importance and the necessity of what he was doing, why it had to be dealt with in this manner, why we needed an interim supply bill, why it was important for the people of British Columbia, why it was important for this government, why it was important for the Liberal Party, why it was important for anything, because it is absolutely fundamental to what we do here.

But it had to be one of the shortest pitches I've ever heard. The members of this House well know that many groups host luncheons and breakfasts and dinners and cocktail receptions for members of this Legislative Assembly. They do it in most parliaments and legislatures in the world. You expect, frankly, in an hour, the passage of time, that somewhere at some point somebody's going to stand up and explain what it is that organization wants, why they want it and why it's the right thing to do.

Now, I would have thought that today, when the Minister of Finance stood up in this House, we would have had at least a few minutes of explanation, of justification, some reasons why it was necessary at this time and in this place to grant the government what is probably the biggest blank cheque — if not, then probably very close to it — in the history of the province of British Columbia.

I don't usually like to round numbers up. It's not my style. If an accurate number is available, I like to use it. I think it's important. I think it builds credibility with the public. But I'm going to round up the number that's referred to in Bill 5. The number, actually, is \$13.39 billion. I'm going to round it up for the purpose of this debate. I'm going to refer to it as \$14 billion — nearly \$14 billion that this government asks this House to approve, without so much as a real please and thank-you from the Minister of Finance, without so much as a significant explanation for it.

I know that the Minister of Finance on occasion can be a man of few words. Sometimes, depending on the quality of what's being said, that's always appreciated by the members of this assembly. But I would have thought

that today, when you're asking for a \$14 billion cheque that you get to spend over the next five months pretty much how you please, this minister might just have given us a slightly longer explanation of why.

[1445]

Perhaps, you know, he'd read *Oliver Twist*. He thought that all he had to do was stand up and say, "Please, sir. I want some more," and that would be sufficient. We'd just either whack him or give him another bowl of gruel and call it a day.

But this isn't some novel. This is the fundamental job of the people of British Columbia that is given to us, by the privilege and honour of representing them in this assembly, and that is to decide and approve what the Crown does with our cash.

I can't help but think that there's a certain amusing aspect to this. It's referred to as a bill. It's Bill 5. It's a pretty big bill. As I said, it's basically \$14 billion.

Now, I'm reasonably well informed that even British Columbia's richest person, Jimmy Pattison, doesn't have \$14 billion lying around in his back pocket. So I think it's safe to say that this is probably the only institution in the province that's going to deal with this amount of money in this fast a period of time with so little debate and comment.

I would have thought that a government, as it approached an election on May 12 — as it was coming to that judgment day that the people get to pass by statute in this province every four years now — might wish to have explained to people why we needed a five-month interim supply and given us some idea of what they intended, really, to do with it.

We've had a budget tabled. It gives us some idea where the government's going. But at heart — because the trust level, particularly in this government, let alone in government generally, is so low now — no one really believes that the budget that was tabled is, in fact, going to be the real budget for the province of British Columbia for 2009-2010. Nobody really believes that.

What they do understand, however, is that we're being asked in this bill to give them the right to spend, as I say, basically \$14 billion in five months. How it's going to be spent is, really, entirely up to them.

The normal process is that this Legislature, particularly through the members of the opposition, does its due diligence. It spends hour after hour going through the budget, through committee stage, through the estimates process, scrutinizing what the government spends.

You know, hon. Speaker, I've got to tell you. In all honesty — and I think the people of British Columbia need to hear it — with the limited resources available to the opposition, we probably don't do a perfect job. Things still slip by. The people's money gets spent in ways that maybe it shouldn't — their money, the money they work hard to earn and the money that through a taxation

system they give to us to spend on their behalf to build a province we should all be proud of.

We probably don't do a perfect job. But at least there is that process. There is an opportunity to scrutinize, to criticize, to ask questions, to raise issues, to do our job, to do the job that we're elected to do.

That opportunity is not going to happen with this interim supply act. We're not going to get that process, which is our duty to implement. We're not going to get that opportunity to actually figure out whether what the government proposes is right.

A former member of this assembly, a British Columbian of some note, a name that's so well known that when I say it in this House everyone's going to know who I'm talking about.... Former member for Kamloops Rafe Mair said that one of the problems that he observed about government in British Columbia today was that when government decided to split this House into two, into a Committee of Supply that operated in what we refer to affectionately as the little House, what it did was diminish the importance of the estimates process of the budgetary approval process — indeed, of interim supply.

[1450]

Hon. Speaker, I think Mr. Mair may have had a point, because I want to come back to where I started.

The approval of the spending of the people's money is absolutely fundamental. It is the basis. It is what we do here that has the greatest impact on the lives of the people of British Columbia, deciding where and how and on what priorities their money is spent. I can't think of anything that is more important. We pass legislation, but without a budget, without money to allow for the implementation of that legislation or its enforcement, it is meaningless. So we come back to that basic fundamental issue, the approval of the spending of the people's money.

When we conclude the process, we hear those wonderful words, those charming, ancient words that come from the lips of the Clerk of the House when he says, with the Lieutenant-Governor in the chair: "In Her Majesty's name, His Honour the Lieutenant-Governor thanks you for your benevolence." Your benevolence. It's a wonderful phrase. It has a lovely sound to it. It has a poetic ring to it. The benevolence of the people and Her Majesty expressing gratitude to the Lieutenant-Governor for it. What can be more sweet than that phrase?

This today is a less — how shall I say? — romantic proposition. This is a pretty rough and ready "gimme \$14 million, and let me get out of here." There is nothing of that wonderful sense of history about this process. This is a grab-and-run. This is a "fill my sack with loot; I'm outta here" kind of approach to governing. This is less than what the people of British Columbia pay us to do. This is less than what they deserve.

As I said earlier, it's an honour and a privilege to be here, a great honour and privilege to be here, and that privilege may not be accorded to all of us after May 12.

But while we are here, we have a very solemn duty to do what's right by the people who put us here, by the people who pay us, by the people for whom we speak.

What we're engaging in here with this Supply Act, with the greatest respect, is really a bit of a charade. We all know that this budget is really a document, if you will, and pardon the mixing of the metaphors, written in water. We all know that what's presented and what has been presented isn't going to be the real budget.

We know that it's not likely the way the government's really going to spend the money. We know certainly it won't be the way government will spend the money if the opposition's elected on May 12, because we have a great different set of priorities for the people of British Columbia.

Frankly, I don't think there are a lot of British Columbians who believe that the budget represents what this government is planning to do either, which is why I come back to it. It's a bit of a charade. It's essentially, if you will, a shot in the dark. We don't know what's going to happen with the economy. We do know for certain that interim supply speaks to what the government thinks it might spend in the next five months, what it might need.

But we know that this was the very same government that last fall, when virtually every other government at every level in the western world understood the world indeed was slipping into recession, basically stood by and said, "Things are going to be fine. British Columbia is well positioned. Things will be great. No worries. Don't worry; be happy" — when, in fact, as I've said before in this House, the chickens started to come home to roost.

[1455]

We saw what happened with dropping revenues. We're now being asked to approve some nearly \$14 billion in expenditures, and we really have no idea, nor can we speak with any confidence, about where we're going to end. The devil is, as the cliché goes, always in the details.

The budget itself is a pretty substantial number. We're being asked to approve $\frac{5}{12}$ of it today to allow the government to meet the payroll, to carry on, to do what they think is appropriate, to address what they believe are priorities, without any opportunity for us as an opposition to do our job and require them to specify what those priorities are — where that money should be spent, how it should be spent, when it should be spent.

Now, I can understand a few months of interim supply. I might even be able to say: "Two months, fixed election date — perhaps that's reasonable." But depending on when this Legislature finishes....

An Hon. Member: We'll be in the middle of the election.

L. Krog: The Minister of Finance suggests we'll be in the middle of an election. He's right — two months

from this date. But there's no guarantee, I might say, that this bill's going to pass today or tomorrow. There's no guarantee when this House will sit because that likewise rests in the government's hands, obviously.

An Hon. Member: It's your dime.

L. Krog: Now, the Minister of Health says, "It's our dime" — somewhat sarcastically. Well, it's actually the taxpayers' dime, and there are, by my rough calculation, whatever ten times 14 billion dimes are. I guess that's — what? — 1.4 trillion. You know, we've come to an age where the numbers get so big, nobody really understands them anymore.

Interjections.

L. Krog: My friend from Saanich South says: "A trillion here, a trillion there. Pretty soon you're talking real money."

Hon. Speaker, I come back to it. That's what we're talking about. We're talking about money. The numbers get so big, nobody appreciates it. But I ask myself as a legislator: "Do not I have an obligation on behalf of my constituents to question an interim supply act for five months, for nearly \$14 billion? Do not I have some responsibility to my constituents?" I would hope so.

What it seems to me the minister really said today in this very short speech he gave by way of second reading debate on this bill.... What he really spoke about was the arrogance of a government that believes it can largely do whatever it wants.

It is so secure in its power that it thinks it can just ask this House to give them that big blank cheque for \$14 billion, not even say so much as a thanks, walk out of here in an election, and turn to the people of British Columbia and say: "Look what a good job we've done. We inherited a surplus budget. Now we're probably going to finish our eight years in office with a deficit one, but we think we deserve another four years." Another four years, hon. Speaker. Really the government doesn't want to face the scrutiny and the process which we are sworn to do in this place.

It has been the job of the opposition throughout history to question how governments deal with their funding. Governments — although some people seem to think they're a separate entity, that they somehow don't bear relation to the people — are, in fact, the people represented in the form, if you will, of Her Majesty the Queen, who in this province is represented by the Lieutenant-Governor. That's us.

[1500]

We get together collectively in this place, and we decide how we're going to spend this money and where it's going to go.

In my constituency, we have a number of things that we think should be priorities. I could just go through what happened in question period earlier today. I can assure this House that if we want to talk about interim supply, one of the things we might have wanted to hear from the Minister of Finance today is some suggestion that maybe a mill that the Minister of Forests described as perhaps a model for the future — a mill that has been a significant private employer in my community for well over 50 years — would indeed have a future. That might have been something we'd wanted to hear the minister address in his remarks.

It would have been nice to hear the minister in his remarks address the significant issues around homelessness and housing in my constituency, in my community in Nanaimo. But we didn't hear any of that. We didn't hear any of that. We just heard him stand up and say: "Here's what it is. I want \$14 billion. I'd like to get out of here. Thank you."

Then we get the little bit of heckling from the other side about the opposition having the temerity to question the government spending \$14 billion — that we might actually ask them to provide at least an explanation.

But no, we just want \$14 billion. Where is it going to go? Well, we want, section 1, \$13.390 billion towards defraying the charges and expense of the public service. Then we want another \$659.7 million towards capital expenditures. Oh, and then we want another — let's see — \$1,153,500,000 for disbursements.

I've got to tell you, hon. Speaker, disbursement is a term we use in the legal profession. That's a heck of a lot of disbursements to put on a bill. This probably constitutes the biggest legal bill I've seen certainly in my career at the bar.

I guess there is a certain cynicism amongst some of us in the opposition and the public that where this money might end up would in fact be — I don't know — in those so-called swing ridings where the government thinks they can either win or retain a seat, where this government's political future may lie as opposed to those communities in this province that after eight years of this government seriously need the money — who actually, when we talk about these so-called shovel-ready projects, need to see the shovels very quickly indeed.

Many of these communities have seen their schools closed, their courthouses gone, government offices gone — those small-town mainstays of the economy of a community where people had some employment, where they had some benefits, where they had some security, and where other citizens would come to build and expand on what existed, to create communities across this province, to sustain them, to fulfil some of that social contract that used to be the basis....

You've heard me before, hon. Speaker, harken back to the days of Social Credit. I've repeated it before — the

wonderful line of the member for Nelson-Creston when he said: "You've made me nostalgic for Social Credit."

I'm nostalgic for Social Credit. There are people on my campaign team who are going to choke on hearing those words out of my lips. I'm not asking for full approval of the Sacred record.

[1505]

But you did understand that W.A.C. Bennett — and Dave Barrett, who followed him — understood that the people in the smaller towns of our province deserved an even break from the government that took their money. He understood that you didn't pour it all into that golden triangle as it exists now, Vancouver and Whistler and Victoria. He understood that it had to actually get out to the smaller communities. It had to get out to places like Nanaimo, like Golden, like Powell River, like Langford — even Sicamous. He understood that.

On behalf of those small communities today, I ask the question: where is the money? How much of the \$14 billion do we get? How much is coming our way? Or is it all going into a roof on B.C. Place for \$365 million? Is it all going to cover the modest overrun of — some member will correct me, I'm sure — close to half a billion dollars on the convention centre?

My people, my constituents, the folks on Vancouver Island want to know: where is the money going to go? Is it going to be spent wisely? Is it going to help them through these tough economic circumstances? Particularly those communities on the coast that have seen this government sit back with a detachment — which I won't call criminal, because I'd have to withdraw that — and such an incredible lack of desire to assist the forest industry that it has resulted in a situation now where the coastal forest industry that really built the communities along the coast and sustained them for decade after decade.... Many of them face ruin.

Is it unreasonable of me today here to ask the government to at least provide some explanation about the Supply Act? The Minister of Finance has spoken, but there are many other members in this chamber on the government benches who could stand up and perhaps illuminate a little.

They could perhaps provide some tiny snippet of information that might give the member for Powell River–Sunshine Coast some hope, the member for North Island some confidence that the interest of her constituents would be looked after — which the member for Cowichan–Ladysmith might be able to deliver back to his constituents and say: "You know what? I was just in the House in Victoria. I gave them \$14 million on your behalf, and guess what. Some of it is going to assist you."

I don't think it would have been unreasonable to ask for that. There's still an opportunity for the members opposite to stand up and address that. There's still an opportunity in this debate. I want to assure the govern-

ment members that we're not just going to come in here and hand over the cash. You're not going to come down to us like Nicodemus in the night, whisper in our ear that you want something and then march away. It's not going to happen.

We will debate as long as we can in order to force this government to do the right thing, to do what it hasn't really wanted to do ever since it took power — that is, be accountable. Be accountable.

You know, the kid who gets caught in the classroom whacking his fellow classmate with a ruler understands that when the teacher says stand up and apologize and take some punishment.... They understand that. That's basic accountability. It's a pretty standard principle in the classroom.

In what sometimes gets to be one of the most raucous classrooms in British Columbia, this place, surely the government could observe the same principle. They could accept their responsibilities to the people. If you're asking for this \$14 billion blank cheque, say please, explain why and then say thank you.

I didn't hear much of a please, and I really don't expect a thank-you. I just thought that maybe there might be the slightest form of explanation and justification for why it is that this government needs a five-month interim supply bill when we've got time to try and get into the estimates process and at least get some justification for why this government wants \$14 billion of the taxpayers' hard-earned money at a difficult time.

[1510]

I wish this government well in this debate, but this opposition is not going to give up. We're going to do our job. Maybe this government should do theirs.

N. Macdonald: I rise to speak to Bill 5, interim supply bill.

As previous members have observed, the interim supply bill authorizes for five months — almost half of the year, without detailed questioning that would normally be involved in estimates — of funding for a series of existing programs. As we go through this process, I think it's important that the public understand the estimates process that is likely to be missed in those five months, the very significant and important work that often goes on in that process.

It is a process significantly different than much of what goes on in the Legislature in the sense that there is a back-and-forth. We see it with the committee stage of a bill, which is an important process, but you also see it with one of the most fundamentally important functions that we have here, which is in the spending of large, large amounts of the public's money.

With the estimates process, there are opportunities to debate in full and question and understand spending and programs in a way that's really far-reaching. There's often tremendous scope given to those discussions and

tremendous opportunity to understand and have ministers on the record identify where funds are going and where programs are intended to go.

So what we will see with Bill 5 and with the five months of funding being approved.... We will miss that process, and there are problems with that. It is important that we have that detailed discussion.

In the first two weeks of the Legislature, we did have an opportunity to go through the supplementary budget process. As part of that, there was an estimates, and even with that very narrow and limited debate, there were opportunities to raise issues and have ministers explain in detail the things that we hear about in our communities and the questions that people have.

As an example of that, even from the previous debate, we had questions around health spending. Even in the limited debate that we had around the supplementary debates, we had important information given about the Invermere emergency room and details about what would happen with funding and where the process was now. So it was a very important opportunity to get on *Hansard* answers to questions that people within the community have.

With Bill 5 and with this interim supply bill, what we are going to miss is that larger opportunity. It has been something that even with last year where we had the full estimates process, it was limited in a way that over the long term is a move in the wrong direction. We were limited in scope — well, not so much in scope, but certainly in the amount of time that we had.

Even in the four years that I've been here, what we have found is that the estimates process has become more and more limited in time. The first year I had several days to go through my ministry. Last year I think it was barely an afternoon to go through a ministry that included the convention centre as well as B.C. Place — and there were many, many questions that went unanswered — as well as tourism, arts and culture. There were a number of questions that we didn't have the opportunity to really fully question and get the full scope of answers that we needed.

[1515]

With this process here, the interim supply, we have the government able to spend money for five months without the opportunity to fully question what is going on. Like I say, it's a process that I've found to be very useful and that I would look forward to engaging in. We have time that's left before we go to election to participate in part of that process. My understanding is that with this, we will not move into that process, and that's unfortunate.

With health care, the questions that are easily raised and are of importance would be further discussion on seniors care and getting those answers, but also things like paramedics.

Some of the discussions that you have in an estimates process.... Just for people's understanding, you have the

opportunity to talk about issues that are quite complex, quite particular to your communities but incredibly important to people in those communities.

I'll just give you a bit of an example with paramedics of what would and should be talked about during an estimates process. In rural British Columbia paramedics are, of course, incredibly important not only for their service to community members. They're also incredibly important to those that visit our communities. The areas that I represent have communities along some of the most dangerous and challenging highways in British Columbia. The Minister of Health would certainly share some of those highways.

The challenges that we've seen with paramedics are in some of the reorganization. In some of the reorganization, it has become very, very expensive to get the training that is needed to get your PCP. If we were moving into an estimates process, which this bill takes away from us, then we would have the opportunity to talk in detail about the paramedic service and to have a back-and-forth with the minister, where the minister would have staff or would understand the issue and give clear answers on *Hansard* that would deal with the issue.

With paramedics, ultimately the issue is this. The issue is that with PCP, with paramedics that receive that certification, you really have.... If you pay for the \$5,000, then really, you are not likely to remain in the area.

When we authorize spending for five months, we're authorizing payments for those five months for a whole host of services which will either serve the people of the community well — serve the people of British Columbia well — or not. In the estimates process there's an opportunity to point out in a very particular area and in great detail some of the issues that are out there so that the Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Health can make sure that the funds we're spending are well considered and that the needs people have are being met.

It's not something that should simply be an irritant to government. It's something that is critically important to making sure that our money is well spent. The government has tremendous resources through the public affairs bureau to put forward its ideas or its view of what is taking place in the wider community. They are able to put that forward, but the public has certain institutions that it depends upon to be a check and balance on the resources of government.

One of those is definitely this Legislature, and one of the most important processes is that estimates process. What we're doing with this bill is moving forward with five months' worth of spending without the estimates process that we would normally have.

[1520]

I think most British Columbians would say, especially before an election, that they want a clear idea of how the money is being spent. The obligation for legislators and

for me is to make sure that we are doing our job, and part of our job is to test each of the things that the government asserts and make sure that the views that are expressed to us by the people we represent are brought here and put in front of ministers, in front of ministry staff, so that they can be understood so that the money is ultimately spent wisely.

With the ambulance service, there is no question that there are opportunities....

Interjections.

Deputy Speaker: Members.

Member, you must keep on the broad strokes and not the detail.

N. Macdonald: With the health issues, we've talked about seniors and talked about emergency room, and we could talk about paramedics — all of those within the system of estimates. There are opportunities to bring those ideas forward so that the minister responds to them, so that it's on the record, so that we understand that the issues that are identified to us by people in our communities are issues that the government understands and will deal with.

There are also opportunities to talk about education and really look at the moneys that are going towards education. We are going to vote, with this interim supply, to provide funding for the system for five months. Yet beneath that, there are all sorts of questions that in the full estimates process we would be able to ask. They're questions that are important and that have, just as with health, implications for people's lives and for safety.

In education, the questions that we would be able to ask have implications for our children's future. So they're important. This is the place and the institution where the obligation is upon members to actually fully understand where the money is going, how it is spent.

Very often in this room, if you watch question period, the answers, when they come, tend to be.... I mean, just the nature of question period, you don't get the whole and fulsome debate that you really need. A lot of it is for a particular reason, and that is fundamentally different than the estimates process where you can engage in a back-and-forth series of questions that really allow you to get to the essence of the funding question you have.

With education funding, it's clear there are a number of questions that are out there. The estimates process would certainly give us the opportunity to clearly understand the actual financial picture that's there, which we ask boards of education to deal with. Instead, we have five months of this year's budget being put forward without that process.

There would also be questions about really specific programs that the government has spent money on, like BCeSIS and the 30-minute physical activity questions

about diagnostic testing. All of these things would come into the scope of that debate.

Deputy Speaker: Member, you cannot go into the detail. You have to keep on the broad strokes of interim supply.

N. Macdonald: Okay. Thank you.

Normally, with an interim supply bill we would have a three-month process. It's usually put in for three months — two months or three months. During that time, there is an estimates process. That estimates process would have that discussion going on, and the discussion would go on until it's completed, usually at the end of May. During that period, before we go ahead and pass the bill, there are those discussions going on.

What we will miss in those five months is that opportunity to clearly see where the money is and to have the discussions that we should fundamentally have. This government has made the decision about timing of elections.

[1525]

The government has made decisions about how we move forward. We often go into elections without.... I mean, this will be at least the second time that we've gone into an election without the estimates process. As I say, it's a decision that the government has made.

The Minister of Finance has corrected me, saying it's much more than that, many times more than that. What I would say to the Minister of Finance is that there's no reason why we can't have reasoned debate here and maybe reconsider and think: "Wouldn't it be worthwhile?"

I'm presuming we won't have the full opportunity. But if the Minister of Finance is telling us that we'll get started on Monday, I think that would be an excellent thing. So we will start with the debates for a number of the ministries. I think that would be a fine thing to do.

Perhaps I'm incorrect in working on the presumption, and I have been incorrect in the past — not often, I'm sure, but there's fallibility. But I work on the assumption that we will not be able to fully enter into that process. As I said, even the limited debate on the supplementary estimates was a debate that was worthwhile.

The minister has assured me that the estimates process will begin on Monday, and if that's the case....

Interjection.

N. Macdonald: Well, I suggest that there are all sorts of realities that will flow from what the minister is saying.

Deputy Speaker: Order. Order, Member. Through the Chair.

N. Macdonald: Through the Chair.

I guess I didn't find it in the minister's speech as to exactly how the estimates process was to unfold, but if

we were to begin with the estimates process, then that would be something that would be well worthwhile. As it stands, what we're being asked to do is approve five months of spending, really, without the normal procedures that we would have, and there are opportunities to make improvements.

Very often what we see in this House is that we find examples of the lowest common denominator and then set that as the standard — that's one of the problems — rather than looking for ways to make improvements. As I said, we have a process. Now the minister says that it's the way it was always done. There's certainly no reason why it couldn't be improved on, and that's one of the points I'm making.

As we go into an election, there's a tremendous amount of information that people would find useful in terms of how much has been spent on advertising — all sorts of financial information that should be out there in the public realm.

The other thing that I think government should consider is.... Rather than using a five-month interim supply bill, there are opportunities to perhaps look at how we could improve it and make sure that there was a full estimates process before we went into an election. That's something that could be considered. That's something that could be thought about.

Interjection.

N. Macdonald: The minister suggests that we would get all of the estimates done, and it's not a rushed process.

It's a process that takes time. There's a process that the government has tried to congest and make shorter. I remember that last year, as I said, there was an estimates process that was supposed to look at B.C. Place, supposed to look at the convention centre, supposed to look at arts, culture and tourism, and that was meant to take place in two hours.

The process is already congested. Again, there's impatience about what we do here, but the fact of the matter is that there are many, many key discussions that should take place.

If the minister is saying that we would move into estimates, I would look forward to that. I would look forward to a discussion on independent power with the Minister of Energy. I think that would be a fascinating discussion. That's something that would be there within the estimates process, given the opportunity.

Hon. C. Hansen: Point of order. We have tolerated a lot of latitude in this debate. The member is clearly outside the scope of what is before the House this afternoon.

[1530]

We are debating second reading of interim supply, which is a very, very narrow scope of debate. We are not here to debate whether or not there should be or should

not be estimates process. We are here to debate interim supply.

Madam Chair, I would suggest to you that these three members, including the current member, are way beyond that scope.

Deputy Speaker: Thank you, Minister.

N. Macdonald: As always, the minister was very gracious in how he's expressed himself, and I do appreciate the fact that he may want to move on, on this. But I think you can also appreciate that we are very highly paid to look carefully at how money is being spent. What is clearly going on here is that there are five months — so that's almost half of the year — that is going to go by without the detailed questioning that is involved in estimates, and that's a problem.

There is a series of questions that we would have with the budget that has been presented. That's a process that we want to go through. But rather than that, we are going to move into a bill that allows government to avoid that scrutiny until after the election.

Now, if it is the case that we're going to move into estimates on Monday, I think that the minister would find that that's something the opposition would welcome. That would be a fine opportunity to look carefully at the figures that have been put in front of us in this House. As I say, it's an opportunity, too, to give the minister feedback from the people that we represent on issues that are important and to help them make improvements to the programs that are offered.

With Bill 5 and the interim supply, there is no question that five months is a long period of time. It is a tremendous amount of money that we're looking at, and it is something that would benefit from an estimates process.

I'm going to take my seat now. I do look forward to the opportunity, beginning on Monday, to begin the estimates process. If the Minister of Finance is offering that, certainly it's something that I would look forward to.

I would look forward to getting the Education file up first. That's a ministry that I have an incredible number of questions about, an incredible number of funding questions. I think that most trustees, most teachers, most parents would like clear ideas about where things like the gas tax are in that budget, things like the implications of funding.

With that, I'll just save the minister the trouble, and I'll take my seat. I thank you very much for the opportunity to speak.

J. Horgan: It's a pleasure and a privilege to rise in my place today to speak to Bill 5, Supply Act (No. 1), interim supply, because I can go home today, and when the kids say, "What did you do today, Dad?" I can say: "I helped the Minister of Finance spend almost \$14 billion without any oversight." That's pretty impressive. That's not bad for a day's work — \$14 billion in one fell swoop.

I've been listening intently to the debate on this side. I listened with rapt attention to the official opposition Finance critic from Surrey-Whalley, our learned friend, who advised us about the history and precedents involved in interim supply. I can also understand the Minister of Finance's desire to move quickly through this.

[K. Whittred in the chair.]

But I remind him, if he's inclined to jump to his feet at any point over the next half-hour while I'm commenting on this bill, that it is a role and function of members to advise not just those that are here of the views of their constituents but also to advise their constituents on what exactly it is that we're doing here. Just what goes on in the pointy buildings?

I live in the capital regional district. I see my constituents every day. I'm very fortunate in that respect. I know that my colleague from Columbia River-Revelstoke has to fly to Calgary to drive back to his house, and I can be home in half an hour. So I'm very fortunate, and I'm very blessed in that respect, because I get to speak to my constituents every day, face to face. I don't have to phone them at 6:30 or seven o'clock at night after the House has risen. I can see them at the rink. I can see them at the mall. I can see them in their homes. I'm very fortunate in that respect.

[1535]

When I see them tonight, as we rise at the end of the week, I'll be able to say that I helped the Minister of Finance spend \$14 billion by standing in my place and offering my opinions and the opinions, potentially, of my constituents on the importance of a supply bill.

I think that there are a couple of things I want to touch on, and if I stray from the scope that the minister is so intent that we keep to, I hope that the Chair will give me some latitude, because I think it's important.

I've got some quotes here from *Beauchesne's*, and I know that the Clerks love it when we quote *Beauchesne's*. I know that the Clerk loves it when we quote MacMinn.

I just want to read something here. It goes as follows: "While cabinet's purpose was to find and maintain support, its closer relationship with parliament provided a direct opportunity for members to question and publicize government policy and to maintain a constant scrutiny of government."

That's our job. That's what the Queen pays us for — Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition. For those in the gallery today, the Queen is paying me to stand here and hold the government's feet to the fire, and I fully intend to do that.

Interjection.

J. Horgan: And with the aid and comfort and support of the Minister of Forests, I'm sure we can get through

the next half-hour with some levity and some insights as well, potentially, from the government side.

It would be a rarity. As you know, I'm always gob-smacked when something thoughtful comes from the government benches, but perhaps it will in the next half-hour, and that would be just great indeed.

We are in a bit of a conundrum. Members have spoken about the tradition of about three months for interim supply. I acknowledged to the Minister of Finance that we have to approve spending while we await the passage of the estimates. I understand that. All members understand that. It happens all the time, year after year. I get that.

In an election year we're now in an extraordinary place where we have to spend five and a half months' worth of money without debate, rather than the traditional three months, or the historic three months. That gives me, I believe, an opportunity to talk about the need for parliamentary reform. Every parliament, every opposition speaks to the need to reform the process, primarily because we're cut out of the process.

There was a back-and-forth between.... I don't know if it will show up in *Hansard* or not. The capable people at *Hansard* try and capture all of the debate, but they don't always do it. There was an exchange back and forth between the member for Columbia River–Revelstoke and the Minister of Finance about just what was going to happen on Monday. Would we be entering into the regular estimates debates on Monday? It was suggested that that would happen. But we have no guarantee of that. This isn't a civilized place.

The Government House Leader holds closely to his chest what is going to happen in this place from day to day. So we can't prepare ourselves. We can't inform ourselves. We can't inform our constituents about the issues that will be before this Legislature on a daily basis. We're advised in the morning, when the Clerks ask what the government business is going to be. The Government House Leader will stand and tell us. That's how it works. There's no advance notice.

The only thing we know for certain is that budget day is going to be the second Tuesday in February. No, wait a second. We don't know that for certain, because of course, we came back in January to bail out the city of Vancouver because of a cost overrun for a housing project. So we were here on the 17th of January, not for a fulsome debate but for one day on a weekend.

I know that I'm off scope here, hon. Speaker, but I do believe it speaks to the notion and the need to reform the institutions that we are here to represent and to operate within.

Last year the standing orders were changed.

Deputy Speaker: Member, you have acknowledged that you are off scope, so perhaps you could tailor your remarks to be on scope.

J. Horgan: I will do my level best, hon. Speaker, and I'm always quick to follow your guidance on this. I will quickly endeavour to get back to spending \$14 billion on behalf of the people of B.C., because that's what we're doing when we're debating this bill.

One of the things that I would like to see. With our commitment now to fixed election dates, perhaps it would be useful, so that we can truncate the extent of the interim supply, this year being five and a half months, back to the more traditional three months of interim supply. I'm fairly confident that I'll be staying well within scope if I say "interim supply" every two or three minutes. If the minister has difficulty with that, then we can continue debate back and forth what is my right and privilege as a member — to speak on behalf of my constituents.

[1540]

I know that the government has a tendency to want to limit and stifle that debate, and if they want to do that while I am on my feet, I am delighted. I am absolutely delighted to have that rigorous discussion with the member for Vancouver–Quilchena.

And now I'm back on scope — interim supply, interim supply — \$14 billion. Hallelujah. Hallelujah. We're spending \$14 billion without debate, without significant debate about the finer points of that.

The member for Columbia River–Revelstoke attempted to raise some of the issues that are important to his constituents with respect to \$14 billion of tax money, and he was told that he was out of line. So fair enough, if that's where the government wants to be.

I'd like to talk about how it is that we can get around this impasse we have today and will have again potentially, four years hence, with another request for five and a half months of interim supply, instead of three months of interim supply. That would be, certainly, to move the date of the fixed election to sometime beyond the budget cycle.

I suggest that for a couple of reasons, and I think that if the member from Quilchena can remember his time on his side of the House, he would probably support this position. The best course of action for legislators, the best course of action for spending public money, is with full and rigorous debates.

We will need interim supply to achieve the results of government, to pay the salaries of the public servants of British Columbia. We can do that. But we can't if we know with certainty that we're not going to have an estimates debate.

The minister suggests that he has the ear of the Government House Leader, and that we may well enter into detailed estimates debates on Monday. That would be delightful. I await the memo, but I don't really expect to see it. I really don't expect to see it.

I want to, again, go back to *Beauchesne's* and some of the thoughts that we can glean from history and

precedent in a parliamentary democracy such as British Columbia. Again, other members have touched upon this, and I won't belabour the point because I know the.... I guess the Minister of Finance doesn't want to hear what other people have to say about his \$14 billion. I know the Minister of Health will assist me in staying to point on this, without any doubt.

The other section of the bill speaks to another \$650 million for "capital expenditures referred to in Schedule C of the main Estimates for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2010, as laid before the Legislative Assembly at the present session..." and so on.

So we're well over \$14 billion now. When I go home tonight, and I tell my kids that I helped spend \$14 billion, they're going to say: "Well, what about me? How about a little something for me?" When I go back to my constituents, they're going to say: "How much of that \$14 billion is going to be spent in Sooke?"

How much is going to be spent in Langford? How much is going to go towards replacing the Belmont Secondary School that's in desperate need of repair, desperate need of replacement? How much of that \$14 billion is going to go towards the issues and important policies that we want to see implemented in our communities, right across the piece, members on both sides of the House?

I know the member from White Rock, the member from Burnaby, have concerns as well and issues that they would like to see represented in this interim supply sum of \$14 billion. But we're not going to get that detailed discussion, and that's fair enough.

The challenge, it seems to me, is that we need to reform the process. When I say to my constituents that I spent \$14 billion in a day, they're going to be dumbfounded by that, I would expect. They know that we're living in an extraordinary time. They know that the economy has been turned on its head. It's not just line items in a budget. It's not just stats from Stats Canada about unemployment or housing starts or retail sales. The economy is people, and the economy is people in my constituency.

They're concerned about what it is that we're doing here. I'm trying to explain to them in this debate on Bill 5, on interim supply, just how it is that we could, in their minds, in a cavalier way, spend \$14 billion without the scrutiny that the Queen expects of us, that the Queen is paying those of us on this side of the House to hold the government to account.

It's not a question of simply allowing this to pass, because of course, the bill will pass for a whole host of reasons, not the least of which is that there's more of them than there is of us, as there has been for the past four years.

[1545]

The challenge, though, is that when we go back to our constituents, we'll be in full flight. It will be an election.

We'll be beating each other over the head, and our constituents will go: "What happened to the \$14 billion?" I won't be able to answer that question because I just don't know.

We haven't had an opportunity to scrutinize the line-by-line items, ministry by ministry, department by department, agency by agency. That's the historic process, and I know the minister is well aware of that. He has participated in it on this side and on that side, as have I, at a staff level and now on the opposition side as an elected member.

We have got to find a better way to do this, hon. Speaker — don't you think? I think you'd agree with me. And I know.... I don't want to put you on the spot by asking you that question. But I think that in a weak moment even the member from Prince George would agree with me. Even the member for Kamloops–North Thompson would agree with me that the....

Interjection.

J. Horgan: Yeah. Never agree with me. That's the thing I like to hear, the principle on the other side: "Whatever comes out of your mouths, I can't possibly agree with." I've agreed with some things that the minister has said.

Hon. P. Bell: Name me one.

J. Horgan: Oh well, meat regulations. You assisted me greatly by doing the right thing for chicken processing in my constituency when you were the Minister of Agriculture. I patted you on the back for that. I've even said good things about the member for Kamloops–North Thompson. I shudder to admit that in public, but I've said good things about the member for Kamloops–North Thompson.

Interjections.

J. Horgan: I wouldn't say it again today for the record, but he knows that I've said good things right to his face and in a crowded room. There you go. I don't disagree with everything they do. I just disagree with the notion that I can't stand here and talk about spending \$14 billion in interim supply

Deputy Speaker: Member, perhaps you could return to the scope of the bill.

J. Horgan: I will certainly do that. The scope of the bill, of course, but yeah, I'm easily distracted, almost as easily distracted as the member for Vancouver–Point Grey. Whenever something shiny goes by, he's right on that, and then something else will go by.

With respect to interim supply, Bill 5, which is before us today. Again, the notion that I will be able to go

home and say, "I spent \$14 billion today," I think knocks over most people. The people in the gallery are thinking: "Wow, look at that guy down there. He's spending \$14 billion."

Interjections.

J. Horgan: Who do I think I am, anyway? Exactly. Who do I think I am?

With a fixed election date, we are in a position, as is printed in this bill, to request.... The Minister of Finance is requesting five and a half months of supply because of a fixed election date.

Again, that speaks to parliamentary reform. It speaks to electoral reform. My suggestion, my humble suggestion, to reduce the five and a half months to three months, as it has been in the past, would be to move the election date to the fall. Not this time, but next time. I'm hopeful.

Certainly, when the member for Victoria-Beacon Hill is sitting in the Premier's chair on the other side of this place, I'm fairly confident that we'll be moving that fixed election date to the fall, where we have municipal elections and school board elections, so that the budget process, the expenditure of public resources, can be done in a thorough and methodical way — not at the whim of a particular government, particularly one that has been in the government benches for eight years.

Of that time, I think they've balanced three budgets out of eight. Three budgets out of eight, and we're looking forward — two more years, two more deficit budgets. So that's how many deficits, Minister, out of ten? I think it's six.

But if we were to reform the way we look at the estimates, whether they be through interim supply, whether they be through supplementary estimates, which we just did last week.... I don't know — how much did we spend last week, Member? So \$662 million last week. And that was just for this month. Just to get through this month.

So five and a half months, \$14 billion.... "Would you hurry it up?" says the Minister of Finance. "I got a plane to catch. The day is coming to an end. The week here in this Legislature is coming to an end. It's time for us all to go home to our constituents and let this interim supply bill go to committee stage."

Well, that would be fine were it not for the fact that I believe I have an obligation to advise my constituents that the process that we're participating in right now, for those in the gallery, is the expenditure of money without detailed scrutiny, without a line-by-line review of where that money is being expended.

I cannot say to the people of my community that Belmont high school is going to be replaced through the capital program of this \$14 billion. Some of it is earmarked for capital expenditure. I don't know where that's going. I can't tell my constituents. I can't tell the

constituents of the member for Vancouver-Hastings. It's a mystery. The only people that know are on that side of the House.

[1550]

"The most open and transparent government in the universe," they said. That's what they were going to be. But today we're going to spend \$14 billion, and we really don't know what it's going to be on. It's going to cover these general areas. We'll talk about it after the election, but right now they're saying: "Can you trust us, Member for Malahat-Juan de Fuca? Would you please give us your approval to spend \$14 billion."

Because I've never had that opportunity, I'm going to give way to the next member to rise in his place, but I will be very happy to tell my kids and my spouse tonight that I participated in the debate to help the member from Quilchena and his colleagues spend \$14 billion without thorough and reasoned debate.

M. Farnworth: It's a pleasure to follow my colleague from Malahat-Juan de Fuca, particularly his last comments — what he said about this government wanting to be the most open and transparent in the universe and the fact that it's not and the fact that gas giants, such as Jupiter, are more transparent than this government.

Anyway, I slightly digress, and I want to come to the scope of the bill before us.

Interjection.

M. Farnworth: It was just an observation, you know. I'm looking at the stars on the other side, and I'm seeing a pair of gas giants right now.

Anyway, we're here to debate interim supply. Just so people at home understand what that is, interim supply is the funds that are provided for the government to operate to keep the province of British Columbia running, to meet all of its obligations — debt obligations, payroll obligations, all of the obligations of the services that government provides through health care, through corrections, through education, through environment, all of the responsibilities of government — while this House is not sitting.

That's no light undertaking. It usually happens every year, but it usually happens after the end of a very extensive, though increasingly less so in the term of this government, scrutiny of the spending estimates of each ministry.

In a normal year what happens is that the government tables the budget. We have second reading budget debate, and after that we vote on the budget, and we proceed to the estimates. The estimates are where each ministry is examined, scrutinized, and we are able to ask questions of ministers, and ministers respond to those questions. They have staff there, and we're able to get into the detailed, in essence line by line, analysis of the budget. We're able to see exactly where the money is going and

where it is not going, how policies have changed and how policies are changing, and what British Columbians are getting for their tax dollars. Are they happy with their level of health care service?

The minister is able to answer questions as to why health care funding is up in this particular area or down in that particular area. The Minister of Public Safety is able to answer questions as to why we are spending X dollars over here and why we are not spending X dollars over there — you know, all the different policy angles that we're doing.

The Minister of Forests is able to explain and answer questions around his forest programs and whether or not he's able to tell the difference between a fir tree or a pine tree and the value of each to the provincial economy. All those types of questions and how much money is going to each of those areas.

Interjection.

M. Farnworth: Well, this is applying to this bill, Minister of Finance — absolutely. I'm just setting the stage as to the importance of this bill, as to why it's so important that you have that ability to scrutinize.

At the end of that process, we vote on the estimates, and then our budgetary work here is by and large done, and we deal with the legislative work. Once that's done, the House adjourns. But prior to that, it deals with a motion on interim supply that grants the authority to government to spend money while we're not in session until we come back into session, until we're able to deal with the budget again, and we're back in this House. People get paid, and that's extremely important, but that scrutiny has been done.

[1555]

This time there's a significant difference between what takes place in normal years and what takes place this year. I might also add that, normally, typically, a three-month supply is what the government asked for.

This is an election year. As my colleague from Malahat–Juan de Fuca so ably put it, we have a fixed election date, so what happens is that we have a budget that was tabled a few weeks ago on February 12. This parliament will be dissolved on the 14th of April, and a writ will be dropped. There will be an election on the 12th of May, and a new House will be elected — a new House that will come back in the fall and see a new budget and a new process underway.

In the meantime, people still have to be paid, so we have this bill before us. The bill grants five and a half months of interim supply to this government. But because it's an election year, our roles as members of this House, our roles and our ability to scrutinize, are truncated. They're truncated in a way that will result in no estimates debate taking place in this Legislature.

That's a very important thing to understand, because what the government is asking for in this bill is the authority to be able to spend some \$14 billion over the next five and a half months. That's a huge sum of money. That's an enormous sum of money. Only a few Russian oligarchs get to spend that much money. Given what's happened in the stock markets, many of them won't get to spend that much this year.

But the province of British Columbia will spend that money, and the public has an expectation that that money is spent wisely. They have an expectation that that money is spent on the areas of priority that are of concern to them. They have an expectation that that money will go to a health care system that meets their needs. They have an expectation that that money goes to an education system that funds classrooms and class size and meets the needs of their children. They have an expectation of all those things.

Our problem is that we don't have the ability, because of where the election date falls in the legislative calendar and in the work that's normally done in the Legislature, to go through that estimates debate and scrutinize each ministry on a ministry-by-ministry basis, on a line-by-line basis, to get the answers that the public expects and to do our job as opposition, which the public expects us to do — to ask the questions and to hold this government to account.

Now, my colleague from Malahat–Juan de Fuca said changing the fixed election date may, in fact, be one way around that. Actually, I think it's not a bad idea. If you were to move it from May to the fall — to October, just as an example — what that would allow you to do is to have a budget tabled in February of an election year.

You would be able to go through your legislative calendar and deal with the legislative duties. We would also be able to have a thorough debate on the estimates process so that when you have this bill made, when you bring forward a bill that grants interim supply, it would be for the traditional three months, as opposed to the five and a half months which is being asked for in this bill.

There's a significant difference between a bill that asks for three months' interim supply as opposed to a bill that asks for five and a half months' supply. People may say, "Oh, but it's only two and a half months," but that two and a half months amounts to several billions of dollars. That's a huge amount of money, even by the standards of the members opposite. I think they would agree that that is a huge amount of money.

[1600]

So it's important that we make that point. That's why I said, you know, that it might be worthwhile looking at moving the fixed election date to October, because you wouldn't have those problems. You would then be able to do the full scrutiny of the ministerial estimates. You'd be able to ask and answer all the questions that one is able to under the current calendar. At the end of it you

could pass an interim supply bill that meets the needs of the public, that meets the needs of the government in an election year and that meets the needs of the opposition in its ability to do its job.

Also, I would put forward — and I'm quite sure that others would agree — that the Finance Ministry staff would appreciate that a great deal. No sooner have they done the work around this budget than they have to prepare for a new parliament coming back in the fall and doing another budget and, at that time, what would be a full set of estimates debates, which would take you through October and November. Then the next thing you know, you're into a whole brand-new year and having to deliver another budget in February.

When we look at the scope of this bill and look at the fact that they're asking for five and a half months' supply as opposed to the traditional three months' supply, we have to ask ourselves why. One of the reasons why is because of the way the current system is structured, which in an election year results in a truncated session and the inability of an opposition to ask detailed questions of the estimates.

Now, some may say: "Why is that a problem?" The government would say: "Well, trust us. We would act responsibly. We would never act irresponsibly." I see the Minister of Health nodding in agreement that he would never act irresponsibly and that he always acts responsibly, and I'm sure he would. But the trouble is there are some on this side of the House....

Interjection.

M. Farnworth: My colleague from Surrey–Panorama Ridge, soon to be my colleague from Surrey–Fleetwood, says: "History tells us different." That's a very good point, because history does tell us different.

Interjection.

M. Farnworth: The Minister of Health says it's profound. That's one of the things I enjoy about the Minister of Health. He grasps these concepts intuitively. He grasps them very quickly. Unlike some of his other colleagues, he grasps these concepts.

Interjection.

M. Farnworth: The member for Kamloops–North Thompson says we cut him deep. Well, I don't mean to cut him too deep, and if we did, I'm sure the Minister of Health can apply some first aid and ensure that the cuts heal quickly — whether it's a tourniquet or a bandage. Just not too tight, Minister.

Hon. G. Abbott: You know that from your experience as a Health Minister.

M. Farnworth: The Minister of Health says I would know that from experience, and I would probably have to agree with him. Sometimes one has to be reminded that the tourniquet should not be tied too tight. Otherwise, terrible things can happen.

Deputy Speaker: Member, can we return, please, to the scope of the bill.

M. Farnworth: Actually, hon. Speaker, I will make sure that we are on the scope of the bill, which is the scrutiny.

As I said, it is around one of the issues. The question is health spending, amongst others, and the question about the role of the opposition in ensuring that public oversight and public scrutiny take place. That's why it's important, because when it doesn't, that's when bad things happen. That's when things start to go astray. That results in bad public policy, it results in bad financial decisions by the province, and it undermines the system of governance that we have in British Columbia and indeed across the rest of the country.

[1605]

In speaking to this bill around interim supply and the fact that it seems straightforward — and in many ways it is straightforward — there are some very important questions and very important principles that we need to recognize and that those who watch these proceedings on the legislative television channel, I think, need to understand and recognize. That is....

Hon. G. Abbott: You just lost the last viewer.

M. Farnworth: Maybe in the member's riding, because his dulcet tones aren't on display every day, they tune him out. I know the drawing power he has in his own constituency. I know that when he's up, the ratings go through the roof in Shuswap. I know the ratings, when the minister stands up to speak, go through the roof in Shuswap.

But I'd like to remind the minister that it's not all about you. There are other members in this House who have constituents who may watch them from time to time on the legislative channel. It's important that some of his colleagues be given a chance from time to time to talk to their constituents.

In the fullness of time, they will get an opportunity to speak in this debate. I must admit — and I am mindful of the rules — I look forward to their participation in the debate to hear their sense and to explain to their constituents, wherever they may be, the importance of legislative scrutiny, the importance of interim supply and why this bill is different in the sense that it's not the traditional three months but, rather, it is five and a half months. As I said a moment ago and throughout my remarks, it's is because we are going into an election period.

That's very important because it brings me back to one of the points I wanted to make about the election period. It's a campaign period, and often things get said in a campaign period that are not followed through on. They're not followed through on after the election.

A. Dix: Like their entire platform.

M. Farnworth: My colleague from Vancouver-Kingsway says: "Like their entire platform."

Hon. G. Abbott: At least we have a platform. When are you guys going to have a platform?

M. Farnworth: The Minister of Health says that they have a platform, and I guess lowering ferry fare rates for two months in parts of Powell River–Sunshine Coast is a bit of a platform.

Deputy Speaker: Member.

M. Farnworth: But I know that the people of British Columbia expect something much more substantive than that. I know that the people of British Columbia expect something much more substantive than a Premier coming down, giving a sermon from the mount, laying out a ten-point plan like Moses. Unfortunately, unlike the Ten Commandments, this ten-point plan doesn't have the substance behind it, and that's one of those things we would have been able to explore in estimates debate.

This brings me back to Bill 5 and the scope of Bill 5 and the reason that we have five and a half months.

Interjection.

M. Farnworth: Actually, hon. Member, there's nothing wrong with milk and honey, provided there's a little bread to go with it.

Hon. Speaker, when dealing with this interim supply bill, there's an awful lot of bread going to be spent, and I just want to make sure that when it's doled out, the residents of British Columbia also get their fair share of milk and honey.

Anyway, I get back to an election campaign and the fact that governments make election promises and much of...

Deputy Speaker: Member, I would like you to get back to the scope of the bill.

M. Farnworth: On the scope of the bill, I agree. That's exactly where I'm going, hon. Speaker — back to the scope of this bill.

Because of the five and a half months of interim supply, that money is available for government to expend over the next five months, which happens to go through an

election campaign, and governments make pronouncement during an election campaign. They're going to spend here; they're going to spend there. They're going to do this; they're going to do that. They're going to build this; they're going to build that.

[1610]

The problem is that we're not sure whether those promises are actually contained within those five and a half months of expenditure. How much of that money, how much of those announcements is contained within that five and a half months of expenditure? How much of that money, how much of those announcements is contained within this five and a half months of interim supply that this chamber is asking for?

That's a very important question. I think that illustrates one of the differences between this bill and a traditional interim supply bill, where we would be asking for three months' expenditure that's going for expenses that have been thoroughly debated not only legislatively in this chamber but also in the estimates process. That's a very important distinction.

So when we're talking about the scope of this bill, it's important that people remember that, both on the opposition side.... You know, for those of my colleagues who have not gone through this process before — and there are a fair number of them — it's important to remember, colleagues, that this particular piece of legislation is different than any other interim supply bill that you have dealt with in the life of this parliament.

I would also remind my colleagues across the way — and I see members there for whom this is their first parliament and who have also never dealt with an interim supply bill like this — that this is not the traditional three months, but it's five and a half months. The reason for that is because, of course, there is an election campaign, and that's a very important distinction.

Interjection.

M. Farnworth: I have to pay tribute to my colleague across the way, the member for Fort Langley–Aldergrove, because he raises a very important point that I think is worth expanding on a little bit.

In this province we used to run on something called special warrants, and that was the way in this province from time immemorial.

Interjection.

M. Farnworth: All right. I know the member for Kamloops–North Thompson was back at the beginning of time immemorial, but the rest of us weren't.

Since 1871 it ran on special warrants at budget time, which were problematic in their own right. They could serve the interest of government, regardless of political stripe.

Interjection.

M. Farnworth: I hear the member on the opposite side make some comments, and let's put it this way. I would wager that were special warrants still in place, the government that he is a part of would be more than happy to use them.

There were some fundamental changes made. We did away with the use of special warrants, and we've gone to interim supply and supplementary estimates.

I must admit that in keeping with the scope of this bill — and just pointing out a slight difference — it is interesting to note how the government has sort of seen how supplementary estimates can be used to move expenditures that are coming into the next year, can be booked into the previous year.

But that is a point that is not part of the scope of this bill, and I know the Speaker wants me to be relevant and speak to the scope of the bill. I see my colleague the Minister of Health nodding approvingly. I must admit I am always grateful when I see him nodding approvingly, because that means I am on the right track.

Interjections.

M. Farnworth: The minister says he's nodding off to sleep, and I certainly wouldn't want to be accused of putting him to sleep. So what I will do is raise another point that he may find more interesting.

Interjections.

M. Farnworth: Oh absolutely, I'll get back to the scope of the bill.

I find it really fascinating, hon. Speaker, because you hear the reaction from the other side. Some members don't seem to understand the importance of the remarks that are being made, and others certainly do.

[1615]

Those members with experience understand exactly the importance of the debate around this particular issue. We're talking about the difference between a three-month interim supply bill and a five-and-a-half-month interim supply bill and the role of an opposition in our parliamentary system and the role of a government in our parliamentary system.

The right of the public is to understand that when it comes to the management of public finances, even though it is an election year, there is that opportunity to scrutinize the debate. There is that opportunity to examine thoroughly the finances and the spending priorities of the government. That is, in fact, what happens in this House.

I think I have made a number of points that I believe have contributed to a constructive and positive debate.

Interjections.

M. Farnworth: I hear my colleagues across the way ask me not to go over the top. I think I have been remarkably restrained in my comments. I have given them a perspective....

Interjections.

M. Farnworth: I like Moses. I happen to be a bit of a Joshua fan too.

Deputy Speaker: Member, the scope of the bill.

M. Farnworth: Yes, hon. Speaker. I was just coming, but I keep getting these invitations to digress from across the government side. Their interjections are not rude and, in fact, are quite welcome.

Interjection.

M. Farnworth: And as he says, they saved my speech. Sometimes, in terms of this House, it is the fact that you get those interjections, which allows you to make a much more thoughtful and reasoned speech.

Anyway, I can tell that there are others in this House who wish to take their place, and I know there are others on the other side who wish to be able to speak to their constituents and see the ratings of the parliamentary channel go up. I know that when they rise....

Interjection.

M. Farnworth: You know, the good voters of Shuswap love to hear their member speak.

With that, I will take my place and hear what others have to say on the difference between a three-month interim supply bill debated properly and fully and a five-and-a-half-month pre-election interim supply bill.

H. Bains: It is my privilege to stand up. It's always difficult, I might add, to follow my colleague from Port Coquitlam–Burke Mountain. It's very difficult to follow him. Just before I stood up, the Minister of Health said that the parliamentary channel ratings can't go any lower, but I challenge him on that. So here I am. I will try my best to uphold the tradition here.

On this interim supply bill, we are talking about over \$13 billion to be approved in the next five and a half months.

Interjection.

H. Bains: The next five months, as the Minister of Finance has just corrected me. Five months, not five and a half months. Nonetheless, it's a long time.

I think the main argument and main idea of us standing here is that we are being asked to approve over \$13

billion in expenditure without our estimates process. In my view, in my last four years I believe that the estimates provided members on the opposition side, on behalf of the taxpayers, to ask real questions.... In many cases, we do get pretty good answers from the government side and the ministers. That's where we can actually explore in detail what lies behind those budget debates and what those budgets are for. Line-by-line argument can be made.

[1620]

We can't do that here. That's the unfortunate part. On one hand, I know that this bill is necessary. I know that this money is needed in order to run the government during this five-month period. I know that this is the money we need to run many of the very essential government services that our citizens depend on.

This is the bill that would pay for the educational services, for example, so that teachers will get paid, the schools are heated and the classrooms are cleaned, and all of the other necessities needed in order to put students in the class and provide them with the education they need and deserve. I know it's important that they need to get paid, and that money needs to be there to pay for those services.

I know that we have hospitals, that we have hospital workers. We know that the patients need to go to the hospitals and get the services they need. We know that the money is needed to pay for those services. The workers need to get paid, to bring paycheques home and pay for the food and put food on the table for the children and for the family. So it is very, very necessary to have the money there.

On the other hand, we are asked to agree with this \$13.3 billion, to approve it in this House without the estimates process. I'm torn between the necessity of this money that is needed to pay for the services we need.... On the other hand, I believe that we may not be doing our duty as legislators. Our taxpayers have sent us to this House to make sure that there is a scrutiny on every dollar they have given this government to spend on their behalf.

I think that's the dilemma that I am at least personally put in.... I have to make my point and make sure that the government side understands and the minister understands why we are standing up here, and at least why I want to stand up and speak on this bill.

I understand that the people elect the government, and they elect them to make decisions on their behalf. But they expect them to be responsible. They expect, when they bring in any legislation, when they ask any approval — especially the money legislation, money motions, money bills — that there is a thorough, proper debate to make sure that they receive the answers, that every penny they are asked to spend on their behalf is justified and that the bills aren't brought in here and passed in haste.

They expect this government to be accountable to them, and accountability means that they justify every action to the taxpayers. They justify the necessity of bringing the bills in this place. They justify the need to make improvements upon what we already have. Going through this process and agreeing to \$13 billion without a proper estimates debate, I think, is not being accountable. In my view, we are failing that process.

The taxpayers expect the government to be fiscally prudent, that they use prudence every time their dollars are spent, every time they take on a new initiative where the tax dollars are needed. By going through this process, through this interim bill, I think that we are failing that test as well.

They expect us to be transparent. This government ran on the promise that they will be the most accountable and transparent government in Canada. In the last four years I expected that would be the case, but I am sorry to report that I haven't seen that. They have failed that test as well. They broke that promise terribly.

[1625]

On the other side, we in the opposition have responsibilities as well. Our responsibility is to hold the government to account for every action they take on behalf of the taxpayers.

By asking us to agree on this bill, they are taking that opportunity away from us. I think that is wrong. By doing this, we're not serving the taxpayers and the public as they ask us to do, and I think we are missing that responsibility.

Also, we believe as opposition that we have responsibilities, that we will be representing the taxpayers' interest here, that we will be bringing their issues, that we will be debating the issues they want us to debate in this House — that everything we do here is on behalf of the taxpayers and the public and in their best interest.

By rushing through bills like this.... We're talking about \$13 billion. That's a lot of money. Without the proper estimate debates, I think we are not doing the job that the taxpayer expects us to do.

We are also sent here into this House to make sure that every action that the government takes, especially on the money side, is done with the public interest kept in the front and foremost. By not going through proper debate in the estimates, again, we are denying the taxpayer that opportunity.

Like I said before, we need to have scrutiny of every penny that is being spent. I've heard people here talking about — on the interim bills before us: "Not a dime without debate." Again, I thought that was a wonderful saying that someone has said here.

We can stand up and speak for 20 or 30 minutes, each one of us, but there's no estimates debates process where we could ask questions about where this money is going to go. We could ask some questions to hold the government accountable on those issues.

So why are we in the situation that we are in? On one hand, we know the necessity for this money to run the government, to pay our civil servants, to pay for the services that our citizens expect and deserve. But on the other hand, we don't have a proper estimates debate taking place here. I think that's where the dilemma is.

You know what? The government put themselves in this situation by picking a fixed-date election and not allowing enough time between the election and a proper budget debate. That's what they did. They chose it. I don't understand what they were thinking when they picked that date so close to the budget. They would have an election....

Interjection.

H. Bains: Obviously, the member from Kamloops doesn't understand the concept of a proper debate before we give them approval on the money being spent on behalf of the taxpayers.

I think that when you pick a date.... Weren't they thinking: "When we pick a May date, there will be a budget before the May date, and we will not have enough time to have a proper budget debate before the election is called"? Maybe it is by design so the taxpayer will never know.

Deputy Speaker: Member, could we return to the scope of the bill, please.

H. Bains: Of course, hon. Speaker. I am getting to that because I'm saying why we are in the bind that we are in. Otherwise, we would have a proper budget debate. But because of the government's actions in the past.... They made that decision, and now we are in this bind.

Anyway, we're here, and we're going to make the best of this time on behalf of the taxpayers to make sure that we will ask as many questions as possible and at least put our position on record on behalf of the taxpayers. People in Surrey expect us, during the proper budget debate and the estimates process, to ask questions about the needs in their community. We won't be able to do that here.

They expect us to come here and ask the Minister of Health: "What is happening to the Surrey Memorial Hospital? Why is that hospital's emergency expansion delayed now until 2014?"

[1630]

Those are legitimate questions we won't be able to ask during this debate. The Minister of Health is sitting quietly and not even heckling me on that. Obviously, he agrees with me that they are delaying and that there won't be any debate to ask those questions.

I think, then, we are not serving the taxpayers' interests well, and the minister won't be able to answer us, or we won't be able to ask those questions on why the

ambulatory unit that was supposed to be completed in 2009 isn't being completed in 2009. We will not be able to ask those questions. Now it's delayed, perhaps two years again.

Those are the issues that I have with this interim bill. We have our folks out there waiting to deal with our transit problems that we have. I won't be able to go to the estimates debate and ask the Minister of Transportation those questions.

Deputy Speaker: Member, second reading deals with the general principles of the bill.

H. Bains: Of course, Madam Speaker. I have a huge difficulty in dealing with those issues in this process that we are going through now.

[S. Hammell in the chair.]

We need a proper estimates debate so that we can go ministry by ministry, line by line and issue by issue. What is happening to some of the issues that are important to the people that we represent, the people that send us here to bring their issues here, have a debate on those issues and go back and report to them why those issues aren't being addressed or, if they are being addressed, why they are being delayed?

We can't ask those questions going through this process. That's where the problem is. I think that's where the taxpayers will be asking questions. Why are we here talking about approving \$13 billion for the next five months and not having to get answers to the questions that they may have for the ministers on different ministries?

We have a number of issues. We have seen recently a huge escalation of crime and gang violence.

Deputy Speaker: Member, please stay on the general scope of the bill rather than the details of issues.

H. Bains: Of course. I will try to do that. I am trying to discuss what is lacking in this bill, and what we need to do if we have a proper estimates debate, line by line, item by item and ministry by ministry.

There are so many things that we need to ask questions about.

Interjection.

H. Bains: We have the post-education minister saying that we'll soon be finished here, and we can have all of those debates. Well, we won't have those debates, even if we pass this in a rush, as the minister is urging us that we should — pass this in a rush, in haste.

But that's not being responsible. The government is elected to be responsible on behalf of the taxpayers. Government is elected to be accountable to the

taxpayers. Government is elected that they don't make decisions in haste. They don't make rush decisions, especially on the money.

There are taxpayers out there who are working double shifts right now. Both husband and wife are working double shifts so that they can put food on the table. Because the government refused to raise the minimum wage, many of them have to work extended hours. They are watching. What are we doing with their money here? What are we doing with their tax dollars? They're watching. How do we discuss their issues? Where is their money being spent?

For us to rush through, as we are doing here with this bill, by giving a blank cheque for the next five months.... I think they will tell us that that's not being responsible. This government needs to understand that. They've been there for eight years. They haven't understood that. The taxpayers are telling us day in and day out that the government isn't listening, the government is arrogant, and the government doesn't care about their needs.

[1635]

This interim supply bill is asking that we agree on \$13.3 billion without going through the proper estimates debate. I mean, the government should have been thinking when they made those decisions to have the election date picked so close to the budget. That's why we are in the position that we are in right now. I think on one hand I agree that we need to approve this bill. We need to approve this money because we need to pay for the services our taxpayers deserve and need.

We need to pay for all those workers that are working hard on behalf of the rest of the province to make sure that our health care is in good shape, make sure our children are getting the education that they need, make sure our skills and training departments are working so that people can get the training and skills that they need, make sure that the new immigrants that come to this country are getting the support that they need to establish themselves in this country, to be productive and to become really engaged in our Canadian way and the British Columbian economy.

They need all those services, and that's why this bill is needed. But like I said, I'm torn, on the other side, that we were not allowed to have a debate line by line, as we do during the regular estimates debates. That's where the problem comes. So we need to create some balance here.

We are using this opportunity.... As Madam Speaker has reminded me, we need to continue to speak on the scope of the bill, but this is the only opportunity I have on behalf of my constituents in Surrey-Newton to bring their issues in whatever fashion that I can.

I'm doing my best to stay within the scope of this bill, at the same time trying to bring those issues here on behalf of the taxpayers, because they expect me to talk about those issues. They expected that the spring session would be the one where we would be talking about the

issues, and we would be talking about why the services that they need aren't being provided to them.

They want us to ask those questions during the estimates debates — why our transit system is so inadequate in Surrey. I can't do that going through this debate. I can only raise that issue that that is a debate that is lacking. I can only talk about manufactured home owners' issues — why they're not getting the support from this government that they deserve and need. These are our seniors. They built this province and country.

Deputy Speaker: Member. Member.

H. Bains: Madam Speaker, they built our country. They are the ones who gave us this....

Deputy Speaker: Member, on the bill.

H. Bains: On the bill, Madam Speaker. Of course.

As I said before, I can't bring those issues here within the scope of this act. I am trying my best to stay within the scope, but my constituents, our taxpayers, deserve better.

They deserve better from all of us. They want us to talk about issues that they want us to talk about, issues that are important to them. And by going simply by this debate and simply talking about whether we should agree with this or we should not agree with this — what is the need for this bill, whether there's a need for this bill — I think we're not able to talk about the issues that we thought and our taxpayers thought we would be able to.

So with that, I have put my position on record. I think our taxpayers are watching, and they are wondering what is going on here. Their tax dollars, \$13.3 billion, are being approved in this House to pay for the services that they need, but we are not allowed to have a proper and thorough debate by way of going through the estimates debates — the process that we have in place.

With that, I will take my position. I know there are a number of other people who want to speak on this bill. It is a disappointment that we are going through this process, but at the same time I do understand that those hard-working civil servants, hard-working workers who are working on behalf of us, all of us, who are doing their best with the limited resources they are given to provide us the services that we need, whether it's education, health care, post-secondary education or building roads or keeping our neighbourhoods safe....

[1640]

Those are the people that I care about. Those are the people I think deserve our support, and I think this bill is needed to pay for their wages and for the services that we need.

Thank you very much for this opportunity. I'll take my seat. Perhaps the other members will stand up and speak on this bill.

S. Simpson: I'm pleased to have the opportunity to stand and add my comments to Bill 5, Supply Act (No. 1), 2009 — this bill — for the people in my constituency, who I know will have questions about how this process works in this place to make decisions about how we get authority to spend money. I want to just take a minute to outline how that process works so that hopefully my constituents, should they be watching, will better understand how the process works.

Every year the government introduces its budget early in the month of February. That budget then, normally, would go through the budget debate process of a number of days of debating the principle of the budget and the broader issues of the budget, which gives every member the opportunity to speak in general terms about spending in the province.

As I'm sure most people will acknowledge, for all of the promises and the commitments and the political discussion that happens, at the end of the day it's those things that actually are resourced and actually have money in the budget for them that are the things that go forward and proceed, in most instances.

So the government brings and introduces the budget. We go through that process of a number of days of debate on the principle of the budget and the broad strokes. We're in the middle of that to some degree right now, where the government has brought some of that debate. We, hopefully, will have more of it in the coming weeks.

After that process, generally, we then go into the estimates process. That is the opportunity for individual members to engage with the appropriate ministers and their senior officials to go line by line through the budget and to look at how spending works, to talk about issues that are important for us as MLAs in our constituency, to talk about spending that we might like to see in our constituency or to talk more broadly about the spending in given ministries and to do it in some detail. We're able to get into very specific projects and very specific initiatives of the government and talk at length in the estimates process about how that occurs.

As that process is going forward, of course the government needs to have the ability to spend money to keep the function of government running, to keep the government operating. It's a fairly traditional practice to bring in an interim supply bill. What that does is it authorizes the government, usually for two or three months of spending, to spend a specific amount of money over a short period of months while this process is completed and the government receives approval for its overall budget.

We have a slightly different situation that happens this year. It happens this year because we will be, in the matter of a couple of months, at a provincial general election. So the government here has brought forward Bill 5, the Supply Act, and asked for five months of spending.

Just so that people get some sense of what we're talk-

ing about and what the scope of this is, what that means is that five months of spending, essentially, for this government means that we will be approving here.... By approving what is essentially a one-page piece of legislation, we approve the spending of....

Interjections.

Deputy Speaker: Excuse me, Member.

Members. It's really difficult to hear when there's a lot of chatter.

S. Simpson: So what this bill does is authorize what is essentially five months of spending for the government. To give people some sense of what we're talking about here, we're not talking about a small amount of money.

[1645]

What that does, in terms of general spending for ministries, is that.... This will approve the government spending \$13.39 billion based on one piece of paper and based on no ability to discuss the detail of that that would normally occur in the estimates process. It also approves an additional \$659.7 million to be spent, mostly related to capital expenditures and disbursements for loans, investments and other requirements to meet certain obligations under the budget.

Finally, it does also approve \$1.153 billion there for revenue transfers to other entities that the government would normally be providing dollars for. So when you add this all together, we're talking about a very large sum of money that's going to be approved here, based on one piece of paper.

As some of my colleagues have said previously, the notion of interim supply is not new. The need for government to get some interim capacity to spend money in order to make sure government runs is not new. It's something that everybody has done, all political parties have done in one fashion or another. It's a practice that is generally accepted, and I don't have any question about that.

The problem here, as I see it, is that we're getting a supply bill here on what is an election budget. So we're approving a series of spending, pushing upwards into.... When you add it all together, I guess we're up into the \$15 billion range, if you add all of these numbers together, the different numbers that are here. So we're spending an enormous amount of money, and we're spending this on a budget that has been prepared going into an election.

It's a budget that certainly many in the province, not just necessarily the people on this side of the House, the members on this side of the House, though we have had our critique.... We've also had those like the chief economist of the Central 1 Credit Union say that the number is based on a shaky foundation, that the numbers don't add

up in the budget. I believe we had a past colleague and a past minister of that side, now a radio commentator, Christy Clark, suggesting that the budget doesn't make sense as well.

Deputy Speaker: Member, on the bill.

S. Simpson: On the bill, hon. Speaker. What we have is Bill 5, the Supply Act, and it's a piece of legislation that's based on the spending commitments here, which we're going to approve in this piece of legislation when we approve it.

To the best of our knowledge.... Because we don't get to engage in an estimates process, we don't get to engage in a process that allows members to understand in some detail what this money is being spent for. Instead, we have truncated that process to do this.

That becomes a challenge. I know that my constituents in Vancouver-Hastings want to know what this money is being spent on. They will want to know what the priorities are that determine these numbers. They'll want to know or have some sense of the decisions and the choices that the government is making in Bill 5, the Supply Act, 2009, how those decisions have been made and where that money is going to go.

But we're not going to get that opportunity, because we're not going to engage in this estimates process. We're not going to engage in a process that allows for the scrutiny, and that's really what this exercise is all about.

The budget process, the process that we engage in, in developing the budget, is arguably the single most important thing that we do as a Legislature — to deal with the budget of the day, to approve the budget, to scrutinize the spending initiatives and practices of the government, to be able to make determinations about whether those spending practices are appropriate.

Bill 5, this interim supply bill, takes billions and billions of dollars and gives the government a pretty free hand to expend that money prior to having gone through that exercise of estimates, where we're on the record.

Ministers get to be on the record about government initiatives. The opposition gets to be on the record about its view in relation to those initiatives. Individual members on either side get to be on the record in terms of how they discuss what's important to their constituents as it relates to spending by the government.

[1650]

That's the challenge that we have. Bill 5, the interim supply bill, doesn't afford us the opportunity to do that. We will pass this bill, and whether it passes today or it passes on Monday or whenever that occurs, it's a very, very thin gruel in terms of being a substitute for the process of estimates. And that's part of the challenge.

We are here for a period more. There will be an election in May, as we all know. The writ will come down, and this place will basically dissolve itself about the 14th

of April. But until we get to the 14th of April, we all continue here as legislators. We all continue here with a responsibility to do our jobs, whether it be government or opposition, to scrutinize the policies of government.

That affords us a significant amount of time between now and then, quite frankly, to deal with the question of estimates. I'm sure that between our two House Leaders, they would be able to look at a schedule, particularly of those estimates that are most critical.

I know all government ministries are important, the work of all government ministers is important, and the services they deliver for British Columbians through their ministries are critical. But there are some that clearly come to the forefront. We can think about Health and Education and others — Solicitor General, at this point in time, with issues going on in our province — that are particularly critical to the public interest at this point in time.

We have time to be able to go through that exercise of estimates, certainly on a number of those ministries, should the government choose to bring the estimates process forward. However, we've had no indication at this point that the government has any intention of bringing the estimates process forward that would happen normally in a regular year.

Instead, we have Bill 5, the interim supply bill, which is not your traditional supply bill that we see every year. What we see instead here is a piece of legislation that precedes an election, where it's approximately twice the length of time, more or less, of a more conventional interim supply bill that we would see in regular times.

As I pointed out, we have here this interim supply bill covering five months of government spending, five months of taxpayer spending. As we know, these are all taxpayers' dollars. They don't belong to the 79 of us in this room. They belong to all British Columbians, these dollars. They quite rightly have an interest in where that money is being spent. Whether the priorities of government and the suggestions of the opposition.... How they feel about that, and whether they think that that spending is appropriate.

The estimates process would give them and afford them an opportunity to have a better sense of what that looks like. We would see that, because you can go back and revisit past estimates debates and see that often it's quite engaged. There is significant discussion that goes on between ministers and critics or ministers and individual members around the spending of ministries.

Sometimes it's around the specifics of the spending. Sometimes it's around the challenges that a minister has to meet those differences. That's a healthy debate. That's part of the reason we're here. That's what scrutiny is all about.

By putting Bill 5, the interim supply bill, forward in the form that it is at this point in time, when presumably.... If I look at the legislative calendar, we're still here for a little bit longer. We've got a few more weeks here if

the calendar is to be upheld. We do have some time here. We have time to get into some of those estimates.

So it does raise a question. It raises a question about the decision that was made to bring Bill 5 at this particular point in time and to put it on the table to be adopted, presumably sometime next week when the debate will conclude. I assume sometime next week we'll complete Bill 5. It will be passed, and the government will be free to spend money up to some 15-odd billion dollars without real scrutiny of where that spending will go, scrutiny that would have occurred if we had the estimates process.

[1655]

So the challenge here really is: is the government prepared...? I guess we'll hear more next week. I believe the Minister of Finance suggested in a comment that he made that maybe there will be some level of estimates process. Certainly, there's no indication that I've seen that that's going to proceed.

I'd be very happy if the government chose to bring estimates on some of the critical ministries, but we certainly haven't seen any indication at this point in time that that's going to occur. That would be a positive thing. But rather than that, we have Bill 5. We have 15-odd billion-plus dollars or so of spending that will go into a number of areas that are identified in the bill.

Now, other members in some of their comments have talked about how to deal with this dilemma of lack of scrutiny that comes with an extended interim supply bill. I would note that when interim supply is brought in, in more conventional years — when we don't have an election sitting out here a couple of months away — when interim supply is brought in, in those years, it really is... We are here, we are working, we are engaged in the work of the Legislature. We are going through the estimates process. We're completing all of that work often at the time that we are in interim supply.

I think everybody has a comfort level to say: "Okay. Well, we're here, and we're doing the job. It takes some time, and we want to put the appropriate time in." It's often to complete, or it should be, and we've certainly seen the government shorten the leash on this one in the last budget cycle. But you know, it's two, three months of hard work to complete the budget process, complete the estimates, get through all of that, and at the end of the day, close with a budget that makes sense. We're not going to be in that process.

Of course, I think as a member has suggested previously, the other thing that complicates this in terms of this particular budget and this particular interim supply bill that relates to this budget, and what makes this more difficult and more suspect, quite frankly, in the eyes of a lot of people, is that the Minister of Finance has clearly indicated that it would be his expectation that there would be a subsequent budget coming post-election — that it wouldn't necessarily be the budget that we saw on

the 12th of February or whenever it was that this interim supply bill is based on. It wouldn't be that budget, but there would be another budget come post-election.

Of course, we have no idea what that means. We have no idea what that budget looks like. We have no idea where the spending priorities of that would be, what the levels of deficit in that would be, whether these numbers, as general as they are, would still make sense in that new budget. There just is no indication of that.

Today as we look at the interim supply bill, as we begin to try to get a sense of what these numbers mean in terms of actual spending in the province... What is the government intending over the next five months if it has its way? What is the government intending to spend \$13.39 billion on without a meaningful debate of the substance of that spending and the detail of that spending? What does the government intend to spend that money on? What are its priorities?

We have seen the budget. We've seen some information related to service plans, but we've had no opportunity to really delve into that. Anybody who is a watcher of the legislative process will know that often as you dig deeper into these matters through the estimates process, you begin to discover what the real meaning of some of these items are, what the real intentions of government are, what some of the detail of programs might look like.

All of those are things that Bill 5, the interim supply act, doesn't afford us the opportunity to look at. So instead of having the opportunity to get into that detail, we're in this situation.

Now, part of that is a complication of scheduling, and I understand that. When the decision was made to go to the fixed election dates, it certainly created in the election year a shortened period of time between when the traditional budget period in February comes forward and leads to a number of pieces of critical legislation in the budget process, including interim supply, and then having an election in the period of May.

[1700]

Some other members have suggested that maybe once we get through this election and through this period, that we should think about when that fixed election date makes sense. Does it make more sense in the fall, in September, in October? That would allow us to complete the budget process in the spring with a more conventional interim supply bill of a couple of months that would be there while we completed debate.

It also would be beneficial to the people that we need to be transparent with. It would be a benefit to our electors, to the people who send us here, to the taxpayers who write the cheque to allow the government to spend \$13.39 billion without a debate. If we had the process where we moved that election date a few months, into the fall out of the spring, we could complete the budget process in a more conventional way.

That might be a good thing for us to do. It might help inform those electors when they go to the polls in future elections, because one of the issues here, of course, and one of the challenges with this and the passing of Bill 5, interim supply, without having any debate on this.... It doesn't help the matter at all. Part of the question here is whether the electorate, the voters who in two months are going to have to make the decision they make, have confidence that they're actually looking at the numbers that they should be looking at or whether there's something else coming afterwards.

If we had a later election process, presumably we'd be well into a budget year at the time of the election, and that wouldn't be an issue. Then we wouldn't be here wondering about what this spending in Bill 5, this one-page bill, actually means and what is actually going to occur and what's going to occur longer term as we proceed through the bill or as we proceed through the coming five months and begin to spend all this money. I think we need to be prepared to look at that and look at it more closely.

As we move forward over the next period of time and into the further debate that we'll have around budget in this House, in the next however many days or weeks that the government deems to keep us here and have us in this place before we move out and head back to our constituencies and presumably onto the campaign trail for many here and off to retirement for a few others who have chosen to leave this place and make this their last time here....

As we do that, I'm going to hear, I'm sure, and I'm sure other members are going to hear a lot of discussion about the economy. There's going to be a lot of discussion around the economy and around how the government is responding to the economy. And much of how the government responds to the economy comes, obviously, through the initiatives that are put forward in the budget.

Deputy Speaker: On the bill, Member. On the bill.

S. Simpson: Absolutely, hon. Speaker.

The point that I want to make here is that as that discussion happens, we need to be able to talk about what the intentions were. The problem with Bill 5, the interim supply bill, is that it does not give us the kind of detail that we need.

Now, we may pull some things out as the budget debate goes on over the next few days, but I'm not very hopeful of that. We haven't seen a lot that happens around this.

As we move forward.... I'm hopeful, as we continue the debate on Bill 5, and maybe in a moment that could be less partisan.... We've made some suggestions here about maybe a shift in what that election date looks like to allow us to complete the budgetary process in election years.

I'd be very interested, and I'm very hopeful that some members from the government side who, I'm sure, also

share the concern about lack of transparency and lack of scrutiny on the budget process — they might even be keener about this issue after May 12; you never know — maybe will get up in their place and talk about whether they have some ideas about how we solve this problem that requires us to have a Bill 5.

In this case, as I've said, this isn't the matter of us having a couple of months of interim supply while we complete the debate on estimates, which is a perfectly reasonable thing to do. This is a matter of having five months, almost half a year, of government spending while we are, essentially, not in this place and are spending money.

That's a problem. That should be a problem for any legislator, in terms of wanting to ensure that due diligence and proper scrutiny and transparency are dealt with in the process around how we spend taxpayers' money. The budget process and the estimates process is what affords us the opportunity to do that.

[1705]

What Bill 5 does is truncate that. Essentially, it does an end run around that process, for reasons that we all understand, but it does that in a way that drags this out for almost half a year, and that's of significant concern. It's of significant concern that we would be prepared at this time to spend that kind of money without some sort of scrutiny and due diligence on the matter.

With that, I guess I just want to make one last plea here, of sorts, to the members on the other side, to the government members, to the Premier and the Finance Minister, who have control over this process. It would be very helpful for us if they would choose to stand in their place somewhere in this debate around Bill 5, the interim supply bill, and talk about what they believe needs to happen to ensure that when we spend taxpayers' money, \$15 billion of taxpayers' money, that there actually is a process that is proven and is thorough.

That allows the people's representatives, those of us who have been sent here, the 79 of us or the 85 of us who will be here next time, to have the opportunity every year — not just three years out of four, but every year — to fully scrutinize the budget, to fully scrutinize the estimates of each ministry, to talk through those issues about how government spends, to engage the discussion about policy and program with ministers that estimates afford us the opportunity to do, and to use interim supply the way that it, I believe, was always intended, the way that I believe it's reflected when I read parliamentary procedure, to use interim supply the way it really should be used.

That is as a bridging tool while we proceed through that exercise, not as a vehicle and a tool to essentially end-run that process, but to say, "Okay, we're in this process. It takes us a few months to complete it all. We've got to keep paying the bills. We've got to keep paying people's wages. We've got investments to make. We have

commitments and obligations to make. We've got to put the money out for those, and everybody appreciates and understands that," and to say: "We'll continue to do that. We will adopt an interim supply bill that deals with a very short period of time while we continue to be here, largely, and fulfil and complete that budgetary process."

That's not what we have here. It's a problem that comes up once every four years. As long as we continue with the kind of calendar that we have today, we will continue to see this problem every four years. We can fix this with some commitments on both sides of the House around scheduling, whether it's around scheduling for elections or for budgets. I don't think anybody wants to mess with the budget process and that, but scheduling.

We could probably fix this problem — then, Bill 5s of this nature that allow government to spend \$15-odd-billion and not be, essentially, accountable for five months of spending over the year, because of the nature of the bill and the lack of estimates — to be able to actually deal with this in a much more traditional, conventional, thoughtful and transparent way — and thorough way, in terms of scrutiny. I would hope that there will be some consideration of that and fixing that, and we'll be able to move forward there.

With those comments, hon. Speaker, I'll take my place. I'm sure that there are others who would like to comment on Bill 5 as well.

C. Trevena: I would like to pick up where my colleague from Vancouver-Hastings left off on Bill 5, the Supply Act of 2009. On the issue of the timing of this, just looking at the calendar today, it's March 5. We are debating the Supply Act on March 5.

Well, as far as I understand it, the Supply Act is there to take you through from the end of the financial year, which is March 31, through until the budget has passed, however long that be, however long the debate goes on, so that the business of government can continue. There's no question that we need the business of government to continue. There's no question that we need to make sure that civil servants continue to get paid, that hospitals keep getting the money through the health authorities and that the money keeps going to the school boards so we keep having the public education system.

[1710]

This is what a supply act is about. It's there to ensure that the business of government can continue until the budget debate is complete — quite simple. It is a very troubling question of why, then, we are discussing this bridging mechanism, as my colleague said, from when the financial year runs out till the budget is passed — why we're discussing it right now, on March 5. There are weeks until the end of the financial year. We've got three more weeks until the financial year is complete.

We have three weeks in which we could be discussing the budget, debating the budget, going through it

in detail, rather than worrying about how we can just ensure that we've got the funding to run government for when we don't pass the budget. Why don't we just deal with the budget first?

If we are in a position where we don't finish the budget, where we are still left without a budget at the end of the financial year, at that point, yes, table a supply act, debate a supply act. You'll most likely get the consent of this side of the House, because we want the government to continue as well. But we do need to have a full and complete debate.

There has been no reason given at all for why we're doing this now, on March 5 — three weeks of opportunity when we could be sitting down and talking about what is in the budget. We know, obviously, that there is a fixed term and an election, so there is a fixed time of when we are in this House. And when we're in this House, where we have a fixed calendar, we know what those limits are. We know that this House is due to rise, under the fixed calendar, just after the end of the financial year, but that does still give us three weeks.

There has been other legislation tabled, but it still would give us.... In the system that we have now in this Legislature in British Columbia, where we can debate the estimates of the budget both in this chamber and in the small chamber, in the Douglas Fir Committee Room, we have the ability to debate the estimates through three weeks and have a full debate — well, part of a full debate, some debate — on the estimates before we go ahead and pass the Supply Act.

If there was some real, desperate issue — that we were going to be finishing the end of this week and had to get this through today — we would be up here setting our hair on fire to discuss that. But as far as we know, we're here until April 2. We have three weeks before we actually need to invoke the Supply Act. So I'm really very concerned about that.

I'm particularly troubled, as well, that we're talking here in a very cavalier way — of saying, you know, more than \$13 billion for five months of spending. Under the Supply Act, we are looking at giving approval for \$13 billion of government spending for $\frac{5}{12}$ of the total amount of the votes of the main estimates. So $\frac{5}{12}$, five months — it's almost half a year.

We will be voting, whenever we pass this Supply Act, to guarantee the spending from now until the beginning of September. From now until the beginning of September without having had the scrutiny and the debate on where that money is going, without any real sense of how the money is going to be spent except in a budget that was tabled several weeks ago that has not had an opportunity to be examined. We've had the opportunity to have some sort of discussion about it but not examine it in detail.

As many people say.... There is an interviewer in my own constituency who will turn and look at the camera

and say: "For viewers at home, I will explain." For viewers at home, we have a system here of.... A budget is tabled. The opposition doesn't just discuss the budget in rhetorical speeches about it but has the opportunity to go through the line-by-line items of that budget, to question government ministers in the estimates process to find out just how the money is going to be spent.

By approving this without having that scrutiny, we are not doing our duties as legislators. By saying that we will pass the Supply Act without having the opportunity to scrutinize the budget, without being able to go through the budget in detail, we are failing as legislators.

[1715]

This issue of accountability is historical. Our parliamentary system was based largely on accountability, on financial accountability. Go back to the 13th century, and this was the root of our parliamentary system — that you couldn't be passing financial measures without scrutiny.

By accepting the Supply Act, by saying that three weeks ahead of the time it's needed, that we will pass this, that we will approve \$13 billion worth of spending for five months without the proper scrutiny.... It goes against the whole parliamentary democratic system, the parliamentary history on which this House is based, on which the federal House is based, on which Houses across the Commonwealth are based — the system of parliamentary democracy that dates back to the 13th century in which we have the ability to raise these issues for accountability before anything goes ahead.

Really, by just saying that we can pass this, that we can approve five months of spending without scrutiny, in haste.... I think it's foolish and irresponsible. I find it very troubling.

As I say, we all know that we need to have a supply act in place for those times when we haven't passed a budget, when we have come to the end of the financial year and we still need to be able to keep government running. We have no question of doing that. We have no problem with doing that. We have a real problem with raising something that undermines both the historic context on which we are based and the accountability on which we now depend.

This is a government that said it was going to be accountable and open and transparent in so many ways. We were supposed to have open cabinet meetings. It was supposed to be telling the people of B.C. all the time what it was doing, and yet here it is wanting us to pass, three weeks before it's needed, a supply act that takes away the accountability, that just gives the government the blanket approval to spend the \$13 billion over five months without question.

I raise the issue of the history of where we are rooted as a Legislature, as a parliamentary democracy. Go back to the 13th century, and this does come back to the 13th century. But we also have procedures that we follow which make this a very civil place to work, where we

have debate, where we are allowed as an opposition to stand up and question a government and where we are allowed as an opposition to go through a procedure.

Again, this is being curtailed by this act, by the fact that we are having the Supply Act and the implication that we will not have the opportunity to debate the budget in the full detail in which it is our duty to debate it — our duty as representatives of the people of British Columbia to examine how the people's money is being spent by the government. It undermines the transparency on which we should be relying.

It is, again, very troubling that the procedures that we have come to expect in this House are once again being curtailed. We've seen this a number of times over the last four years, where bills have been pushed through very rapidly, where the government has used its majority to make sure that things can happen very quickly, within a day or within two days, where we have a very set format for how bills are introduced. Bills are then debated, they go to committee stage, and then they are finally passed. This is supposed to go over several days, sometimes several weeks, to allow for scrutiny and full debate.

We've seen over the last four years that this hasn't happened very regularly here, that there have been problems with this, and we are seeing that, I think, here with this Supply Act. We are seeing the system being short-circuited. We are seeing that the government is saying: "These are our rules. We're changing the rules midstream."

Yes, we agree we need a supply act, but we also need to have full scrutiny of how money is going to be spent, and we need to have full scrutiny on behalf of the people we all represent. We're not working here in a vacuum. It might feel like that sometimes. You're in this vaulted chamber, and nobody is listening, and nobody is watching.

[1720]

But this is very real, and this has an impact on the lives of four and a half million people in B.C. What we decide here, how we decide things are going to happen, how we decide effectively.... It's not just the laws, but how the money is spent. How the budget is spent impacts four and a half million people.

That is why it is so troubling when we play around with the rules, when we try and push things through and when we see what is happening with a government that says, three weeks before we need it, that it wants approval to spend \$13½ billion without scrutiny. I would hope that the people of B.C. are shocked by another very transparent attempt by this government to railroad its own agenda through.

I say that, but I think we're also aware in this that we have an election coming up. We've had indications that the budget that was tabled will not be the budget that will be in play assuming that the government is re-elected. They would bring in another budget in September, one would assume, when this interim supply, which we are being asked to approve today....

We are being asked to approve this interim supply in early March, which is supposed to be a bridge from now until September, when the real budget is going to be brought in. Maybe it doesn't really matter that we're not having the ability to scrutinize the budget that this government has tabled. The government has already pretty well acknowledged that it doesn't matter anyway, because if they are re-elected, they're going to come in with a completely different budget.

We are discussing this, which gives the approval to spend more than \$13 billion. My colleague from Vancouver-Hastings, who does the estimates, says it's about \$15 billion. It's a huge amount of money. We're talking approval of almost half the budget, a half-year's spending, in a few days, a few days early, a few days without debate.

As I say, I would hope that the people in B.C. are very aware of this and very concerned about how, yet again, their rights are being eroded — their rights of what they should expect from their Legislature, their rights of full debate and a full discussion on every aspect of every cent that is spent.

We keep going back to: "Not a dime without debate." Well, we've got \$13 billion without debate. We've got the issues of all the times that people have literally gone to the wall for the right to have a debate about how their money is spent, how their tax money is going to be spent. It goes back through history.

Here again in this Legislature this government is trying to ignore that tradition, ignore that history and railroad through a bill that we don't need at the moment. What is wrong with taking a reasoned approach? What is wrong with saying: "Today is March 5. We're coming back here." It's a Thursday. This Legislature wraps up on a Thursday afternoon. Well, we could have actually started this Thursday.

Instead of starting with this debate this Thursday, we could have started with a bit more of a debate on the budget. Start looking at the estimates. Start going through ministry by ministry on how the money is going to be spent, so that when we come to deciding whether this \$13½ billion should be spent, we have at least an idea of how it's going to be spent.

Instead, we are just being told: "Trust us." Trust us. I've got to say that after four years, my trust has eroded even more than it had by the previous four years with this government. So I get very, very worried when the government says: "Trust us with more than \$13 billion for five months. Trust us with your \$13 billion up until September. It's okay. We know what is best for you."

[1725]

Madam Speaker, this might seem to be a very dry debate for people who are sometime watchers of the Legislature, but I think it is, again, a debate that goes to the very root of why we're here — our role and our public duty to analyze what the government does.

Our role as opposition is not to accept what the government does. Sometimes we agree with the government. There have been times when we do agree with the government, but our role is to question the government. That's what an opposition does. We keep getting told: "You're always opposing." Well, yes. That is the opposition's job.

Our job is to question what is happening, and our job is to look at how moneys are being spent, to look and see what is happening with any of the ministries. It's to look and see what's happening with forestry. How is that money being spent? In health, how is that money being spent? In child care, in education, how is the money being spent?

We are not being given this opportunity. We're being given an assumption that this government knows best, that this government knows how it's going to spend the \$13½ billion and that the people of B.C. don't have to know. They can just say: "It's fine; don't worry; it'll all be happy. We're going to put out a bunch of promises between now and May, and then we're going to come back and...." Assuming that they win. It is obvious that that's what they're thinking, as you can see by the rapt attention — that they're going to have a new budget.

I am very, very troubled by, once again, a curtailment of the procedure. Procedure is what makes our parliamentary democracy work. The rules are what make our parliamentary democracy work. The concept of transparency is very nice, but it isn't what is coming from the government side.

Transparency helps make democracy work. It helps. It helps for people to know what's happening. It helps the media to be asking questions of what's happening, for the fifth estate to be out there saying: "What is the government doing?" But it is our job as legislators, our job as opposition, to question the government on its budget and to question why it is necessary, on March 5, to bring in this supply bill.

There has been no justification for why we need to be discussing this now, when we don't have the end of the financial year for another three weeks. I would think, as I said earlier on in my remarks, that to bring this in closer to the end of the month would get it through pretty easily.

Yes, we'd want our say on it, because that is our job: to discuss it and debate it. But let us have our say on it once we've had a look at the figures. But it's \$13 billion, five months' spending, without that opportunity — \$13 billion in an effort to, again, balk the system, in an effort again to undermine the traditions and histories that make this place and make the other legislatures. It's exceedingly worrying.

[K. Whittred in the chair.]

I would hope that the government stops and thinks about this for a little while and maybe decides to table

it for a while, just to say: "Okay, it's the end of the week. It's Thursday afternoon. The opposition is clearly upset about this. The opposition doesn't want to be having the supply bill discussed now. We realize that we don't have to bring it in now. We have brought in two other pieces of legislation. Maybe we should be discussing those in this House, and maybe we should be discussing in the smaller chamber, as has become tradition."

Although it's becoming curtailed, as it has become tradition, maybe that's where we should be discussing the budget and the estimates debate so that we are all aware of what it is that this money is going to be spent on, so that the people of B.C. are aware of what this money is going to be spent on, so that the people of B.C. aren't just given spin and gloss and just being told, with a little pat on the head: "Don't worry; trust us."

I don't trust them, and a lot of people I represent don't trust them. A lot of people I represent would say: "If you are spending \$13 billion, I want to know how it is going to be spent. I might agree with it; I might not agree with it. But I want to know how it's going to be spent."

[1730]

With that, Madam Speaker, I will wrap up my remarks. Again, I give the government the opportunity. It's a Thursday afternoon. On Monday let's come back. Let's start looking at the details. Let's say that we can table this until closer to the end of the month, closer to the end of the financial year, when we realize that we need to have a supply act to get us through until after the election, because we're getting the sense that this government doesn't want its budget passed before the election.

Let's get through till after the election and then keep government working, keep the money going. But why rush it? Why bring it in now? Why bring it in three weeks ahead of time? So I give the government the opportunity to say: "We'll leave it. We'll bring it back later. We'll have a debate on the budget. We'll let people really see where the money is being spent, and then we'll look at the time frame. We'll make it shorter than five months, and we'll do it when we need it."

With that, Madam Speaker, I will take my place and let others who want to participate in this debate do so. I thank you for the opportunity of speaking.

S. Herbert: I'd like to thank my colleague from Vancouver Island, for North Island. I think her remarks really elucidated the problems we've got with this supply bill, and I think really kind of outlined in a clear way and in a way which I hope the government could understand.

I know that sometimes you have to repeat things a few times before they get involved into the mind, into the cortex. I know that, because sometimes I myself need to hear things a few times to get them clear. So if I do repeat myself, hon. Chair, I assure you that it is intentional. It is so that the government gets a chance to

hear that my constituents, and constituents and people across this province, are a little bit uncertain why this is happening.

Now, this is my first debate of supply, on Bill 5, my first debate of a supply act. I guess that would be Supply Act (No. 1), 2009. I'm trying to understand this here, and I think it would be helpful for people at home and people watching on the Web and people reading the *Hansard* to just get a picture of what's going on here today.

Today, March 5, we're debating a supply act which will come into force once this fiscal year is up, but it's a little odd to me why we are debating it at this time, because we still have a number of weeks to go before this House finishes sitting.

I know the government often in the past has enjoyed shutting the House down or not sitting at all. Maybe that's what the plan is; I don't know. Maybe it's not.

Deputy Speaker: Member, could you confine your remarks, please, to the general thrust of this bill.

S. Herbert: I believe I am, but I take your point, hon. Chair.

I think what we've got going on here is that a supply act has been brought in, in such a way that we don't get to debate the budget, and that's a concern. So I'm a little uncertain about why we are bringing the Supply Act in at this time, when we could bring it in near the end of this session, as is quite often the case.

I also find it a little bit interesting that it's for five months, for a long period. I think that's another problem, because we see again that the government is trying to put this forward, as they've done in the past. I did a bit of research on supply acts and interim supply and how those relate to budgets and, certainly, budgets past.

I think there's a very useful article that appeared in *The Tyee* by an author named Will McMartin. He had this to say around supply acts in general. It relates to supply acts and budgets and how they relate, and that's important in understanding where we're at today.

[1735]

In the article, he writes:

"Is Hansen's fiscal plan" — sorry, is the Finance Minister's fiscal plan — "a real budget that will guide B.C.'s fiscal affairs for the entire year, or does the Legislature have to come back sometime later this year to pass another one following the election?"

"The short answer is that it all depends on whether the B.C. Liberals allow the Legislature to function in the democratic manner that it was designed to do or whether, instead, they replay their dodge of 2005."

I needed to go back in history to read a little bit about that dodge he refers to, and I will be speaking a little bit about what Joy MacPhail had to say back in 2005 when the Liberals performed this neat trick where they bring forward a budget and then don't actually debate it, don't actually allow the focus on the estimates, and I think that's an important place to go.

Interjections.

S. Herbert: I hear one of the members say something about the 90s. I think it's the Minister for Advanced Education. Well, I think it's important to remember that he should know better. I, in fact, was in high school in that period. I think it's interesting that they refer to the past all the time when they don't want to talk about the future or about the budget. I think it's also interesting....

Interjections.

Deputy Speaker: Members, order.
Sit down, Member.

Interjections.

Deputy Speaker: Order.
Continue, Member, with the caution to please remain relevant and on topic.

S. Herbert: The article goes on to say that if the Finance Minister:

"...and his party debate and pass the spending estimates introduced last week, there is no fiscal requirement for the Legislature to be recalled for another budget until next year." Now, I think that's a good thing. "But if the Liberals refuse to defend their budget during an estimates debate and instead pass an interim supply bill before the Legislature is dissolved, then the House is nearly certain to open in September. Does this matter? Yes, it does."

So I think, you know, the author really could almost foresee what was coming, and indeed here we are with an interim supply bill. This article was written February 23, and here we are on March 5 with an interim supply bill. So he's reading the history book.

The government seems to be following their history book where they get around actually debating estimates by just introducing interim supply bills and debating what their priorities are and the very real holes which are in that budget.

I'll continue on with this article here. It goes on to say basically.... So the government, through amending the Budget Transparency and Accountability Act, basically made it so that they:

"...must table the estimates 'no later than 90 days after the post-election appointment of the executive council.'" That was early on. "Four years later, on the eve of another election, the B.C. Liberals saw and took their opportunity to avoid having to put forward and debate an actual budget for the entire year. Instead, in February of 2005 the Finance Minister introduced a budget and spending estimates for 2005-2006."

Now, this is what just happened a few weeks ago, following this historical pattern of the government.

"But before the estimates could be debated, the B.C. Liberals passed an enormous interim supply bill providing moneys for about half a year of operations."

This bill that we're debating today contains money for $\frac{5}{12}$ of the year, so about half a year of operations.

"The Legislature was then dissolved, and B.C.'s politicians hit the hustings in anticipation of the general election."

I wonder if that same kind of thing is going to happen this year. Maybe.

Then here we go again, speaking about 2005: "Campbell's Liberals won re-election." Now, this time, that's not going to happen.

Interjections.

Deputy Speaker: Member.

S. Herbert: I hear they're excited about winning re-election back in 2005. Certainly they were excited, because then they went in and changed the budget and basically eviscerated a lot of programs. I guess they're excited about doing that this time too.

The government at that time "had enough operating moneys until about October." But then they were required to bring in a budget estimate by that time, so they did, and basically, because they were unwilling to debate it, they never actually had to defend their budget because they never passed it. Here we go with what's happening here.

[1740]

Basically, that looks exactly like what we've got happening here. They refuse to defend their budget. I've noticed on this interim supply act that none of them really seemed to want to get up to speak about how excited they are to introduce this interim supply act. Maybe it's because they understand that this is not the normal case for parliaments. It's only the normal case for B.C. Liberal Parliaments where they try to get around any sort of accountability.

So it says here: If the Campbell Liberals refuse to defend their budget through the estimates debate...." Sorry. If the Liberals....

Deputy Speaker: Member. Member, I'm reminding you that you do not refer to any member of this House by given name. And I also ask you please to return to the relevancy of the bill.

S. Herbert: All right. I believe it's very relevant because this is explaining why we're here on the Supply Act. If they refuse....

Interjections.

S. Herbert: I'm not questioning the Chair, hon. Members. I'm saying where I believe I will continue speaking about this budget, this supplementary act.

Deputy Speaker: Member. I suggest that you get on with your remarks. You're just sort of digging yourself into a hole. Please continue.

S. Herbert: Thank you, hon. Chair. I appreciate the consideration.

In speaking about the Supply Act (No. 1), 2009, I think it's important to remember what we're doing here. This is three weeks away from where we reach the actual need to bring in a supply act, which is just the same as Will McMartin argued in his *Tyee* article about 2005.

As a new member to this House, I expected — certainly, based on the much-vaunted open and accountable government that this government claims to be — that we might actually see debate of estimates, we might actually see that kind of discussion and not have the Supply Act (No. 1), 2009, brought in before we could even reach that period. It just seemed to make sense to me.

When I was a Vancouver park commissioner, we had to debate anything, and we would get scrutinized by the public for anything over \$30,000. That was where we had to pass motions, take debate and listen to discussions from the general public, because they were concerned, and they wanted to make sure that their money was spent properly.

Now, this interim supply act precludes, in a large way, much of that kind of debate. That disturbs me because, as government members, I think we need to be accountable for how we spend taxpayers' dollars — every dollar.

I think what we see here with the Supply Act is that we're going to have months and months with no debate of, really, about \$13.39 billion that is here in the bill that the Minister of Finance and Minister Responsible for the Olympics.... This is billions of dollars.

I hear laughter from the other side about billions of dollars being spent without debate. I don't think that's exactly what we should be doing in this august chamber. It's not very funny.

When we have to debate at a local level \$30,000 in expenses.... We've got to debate in a true and real form with discussion, with questions, with the whole thing about how that's being spent. If the budget doesn't get that kind of debate because of this interim supply act, I really question the Supply Act and its real place in our democracy.

I think that the thing with spending, really, billions and billions of the public dollars here as a dodge from debating the much higher billions and billions of dollars is really troubling. What we know is that in the future, just as we saw in this article and we know from our history, what was announced in a budget and in a throne speech really isn't worth much if it's never approved and eviscerated and rebrought back in the future months.

[1745]

Questions about tourism, culture and the arts and the big budget cuts there will never be answered. It's five months with a lack of scrutiny and then bringing it in once an election is over, and the people will not get the opportunity to pass judgment on how that estimate actually would be spent because we'll never get there.

I think I'll turn now to the remarks of Joy MacPhail in discussing that 2005 Supply Act:

"This is from *Beauchesne's Parliamentary Rules*: 'Interim supply provides the government with the money to meet its obligations during the time before the main estimates are approved.'" I underlined "before the main estimates are approved."

This is Ms. MacPhail:

"Well, Mr. Speaker, we actually have weeks and weeks to go before this fiscal year even ends" — which, interestingly enough, is where we're at right now — "before there is even a requirement for interim supply, let alone for the period of time that still remains in this...parliament — so it's bizarre that we're doing a bill for interim supply. It goes against the very foundation of the British parliamentary system."

So, you know, we look back at history, and we need to learn from history. It didn't work then; it's not going to work now.

Interjection.

S. Herbert: History, as I hear my colleague say, says we can't trust this government, and certainly broken contracts, etc., prove that point.

"What else does *Beauchesne* say?" This is coming from Joy MacPhail's debate in 2005, where we were doing exactly the same thing we're doing now, so the government can escape from debating their budget.

"Interim supply is normally requested in the first supply period for the three months of the new fiscal year for all departments of government.' We're still in the old fiscal year," Ms. MacPhail writes. "We're in the old fiscal year. It doesn't expire for weeks and this government's not only ramming this legislation through, but it's asking for additional spending." She says, "No matter how much heckling these government caucus members want to do, this is unprecedented."

Now, I don't hear much heckling today. Maybe because they got that through earlier and realized there really is not much to say about what's going on here, because it is so sad and disappointing.

Ms. MacPhail goes on to say:

"In addition, interim supply is requested for other items in the estimates, depending upon the need in each case. The main estimates and the bill based thereon are not disposed of until the last allotted day for the supply period ending June 30."

That's what it says in these remarks. Basically, supply should never go beyond the three months of the next fiscal year, but we have here a government which is pushing it months and months beyond that just for electoral purposes, which is not good for taxpayers. It's not good for democracy and shouldn't stand in this House. So that rule is broken.

I think, just in terms of recognizing what was happening at the time and also remembering about trust of this government, she goes on to say:

"Of course, this government likes to set new records. They love to be the first in everything," she said at the time. "They love to attack the poor first. They love to break contracts the first. They love to throw environmental rules out of place. They love to attack children and families first. Now they attack the very foundations of parliament, and they revel in it."

Or they laugh about it, as I'm hearing from the other side.

I think that's too bad, because it does a disservice to this place and it does a disservice to the very concept of

democracy that we were all elected to defend. I know that electioneering and partisan politics get the better of all of us sometimes, but I would hope that when we're debating billions of dollars, we would be able to set that aside just for once so that we can actually do the best for the taxpayers by debating how we're spending their money.

I think this is interesting, too. Ms. MacPhail went on to say:

"God forbid anybody challenges them on their records. They say, 'Oh, other governments were worse.'"

You know, in the last couple of months that I've been here, that's about all they say.

They also say they are wrong and they don't get anything and: "Oh well. What about the '90s?" I think that's kind of a hobbyhorse they like to ride, because they've run out of ideas, and they've run out of a creative approach for bringing our province together. It's a disappointment for me and for friends and constituents.

[1750]

I'm not perfect. None of us is perfect, and I think what we need to realize is that because we're not perfect, we should never try and pass things without debate, because other people can teach us things. Other people can make us learn where we've gone wrong.

I think back to the past when the Liberals decided to cancel seniors bus passes. There was a huge outcry. The government realized it was wrong and gave them back. This took a number of months.

Or maybe the other case. I think it was people who were not allowed to get dentures because they couldn't afford them, when they used to be supplied with the finances to be able to get them. Then they were told: "Well, we'll give you one denture. You can have one for the top..."

Deputy Speaker: Member. Member, substance of the bill, please.

S. Herbert: Just to finish.

...or you could have a blender — one top of a denture or a blender. Forget about eating food. Well, certainly the bill that we've got here is pretty thin gruel, so I think that does relate to that discussion.

The Supply Act does not provide a lot of nutrition. It does not supply a lot of the vitamins, the substance of democracy, because it hides it. It hides away for a number of months what the government should be doing in public. I think that in doing so, it hides the budget which should be up for debate, because we would be able to show there were many problems in that document. That is why the Supply Act here is so worthy of debate today. It really should not be here right now.

I'm debating a document which really should not be in this House at this time if the government was interested in democracy or in listening to what people and constituents — the people of British Columbia who pay their taxes, who pay bills, who pay our salaries — would want us to do.

I think that's a big reason why I'm concerned about this debate and about this bill that's been brought forward, Bill 5. I think about Bill 5. It's brought forward as a way to give a high five to government and five in the eye to those wanting government accountability.

Interjections.

S. Herbert: I'm here all week. And yes, drive home safely — for the government members on their way out the door.

I think I'll get next into what our Finance critic, the member for Surrey-Whalley.... He related that there are real questions that British Columbians have and that the opposition has about this budget and about the Supply Act. And I'm sure there are real questions that members of the government have as well, though we know that often those questions are not answered, as it seems that quite often that things are rammed through without debate or dialogue.

That's led to all sorts of controversy and rumours and discussion of dissension on that side around a number of items in the bill. I've heard from a lot of people about the arts cuts and their concerns about what the government is doing there.

On the Supply Act, there would normally be an opportunity again.... As I said earlier, I may repeat myself or repeat my points a few times because I think it is important for people to understand them. So far, I'm not getting a lot of recognition or seeing other members on the government side of the House understand that what's going on today really is not something that should be happening at this time.

I'm new to this chamber, so I thought I would not have to be explaining how parliamentary democracy works to that side of the House. But I guess, based on my historical research of what happened in 2005, what is happening now and what has happened before then, they don't seem to understand the idea of really digging in for the tough questions on a budget or a supply act.

That basically puts us in a place where the budget likely will be different in the fall because the Supply Act will probably supplant the ability to even question that budget or allow it to be passed. So we will get a different budget in the fall.

[1755]

I think we all remember how there were promises of a new kind of caring government, and then the axe dropped and the real face was shown of devastation across British Columbia.

This is a time-honoured process that has served parliamentary institutions around the world very well for a long time. Yet because of this introduction of interim supply, the opportunity to debate in the real way that the people expect us to debate will be closed off.

I know that many members here are from local city councils, from municipal councils, from rural councils, from parks boards, from school boards, from the business world, from the labour world, from small business, from big business, from the arts. Well, I know one from the arts. They're from forestry, from farming, and it goes on and on. People have many, many different backgrounds here.

Just like we would never allow any of those positions.... You'd never be allowed, in your job, to get away without debating with your colleagues — unless you were a dictator — how you were spending their money. You would never get away with that. But here the government seems to believe they can get away with that and that that is how it should work.

I disagree with that notion, and I think most British Columbians, when looking at how this was set out, would agree that there should be debate on billions of dollars in expenses. I'll say again that maybe it's because I'm a young man. But I look around at my colleagues on the official opposition side of varying ages, all mostly young in spirit, and they agree with that notion.

Interjections.

S. Herbert: They tell me to be careful, and I will be.

They certainly appreciate the idea of debate on the spending of billions of dollars. Right now we're flailing away, and the government is refusing to respond with the very idea that estimates debate will occur on the budget. We are concerned because of this introduction of a supply act and the history of this government of saying one thing and doing another.

I don't have a lot more to discuss at this time. I've made my point and, I believe, made it a number of times. I would hope the government side would have picked up on maybe one of those instances. I tried to use sometimes florid examples, sometimes very banal examples, sometimes examples which might have been a bit of a reach because I know some members are interested in flights of fancy on that side and on this side.

I tried to speak about it in a way that a child would understand. I tried to speak it in the way a corporate executive would understand. I know that the members on that side are smart people, as well as the members on this side, and that they care about their community and about British Columbia.

I think they've made an error in this case. I think they made an error in 2005, but maybe the smart factor of the political factor, the partisan political factor, is getting the better of their smart democratic factor in their beings. I certainly hope they might relate to the discussion here, because I know they are smart people and care about this province, as do I. I would hope that they could take the better judgment and could debate the billions of dollars that are planned on spending and that were announced with such attempts at fanfare.

It matters to the taxpayer of British Columbia. But really, it's not about taxpayers; it's about citizens — citizens involved in a democracy, citizens with the opportunity to engage with their government. We are representatives of citizens who want us to be looking out for their interests but who also want the opportunity to look out for their own interests by watching us debate how we're spending their money so that they can tell us if we're right or if we're wrong.

On that note, I will give up my place in this debate with the hope that the government changes its mind.

Deputy Speaker: Member for Esquimalt-Metchosin.

M. Karagianis: Thank you very much, hon. Chair and my colleagues. I stand to take my place in this debate on Bill 5, the Supply Act, 2009.

[1800]

I would like to say that I listened to my colleague for Vancouver-Burrard. I understand and sympathize with his disenchantment with the process that he's experienced in the short time that he's been in this House. I do respect his fresh point of view on the business of this House.

In standing and talking to Bill 5 here, I want to first of all talk about the reason for the supply bill. I do understand the need for this kind of supply bill: to make sure that the business of government continues and that operations over the coming months actually continue and are flawless. There's no question about my support for that and my understanding of that, but I do have a couple of concerns with this.

I think, first and foremost, my concern is that without adequate debate on the budget.... I know my colleagues on this side have spoken quite eloquently about the democratic need for scrutiny and full and open debate on the budget. As we move into approving the Supply Act here, which will see us through the next number of months, my first concern is that somehow there is an implicit agreement with the budget in us agreeing with the Supply Act.

I would have to say that for me, I cannot in any way have an implication that I agree with a budget that I haven't had adequate scrutiny of. When you move into approving a supply act, it does say that for the next five months of this year that we're in full agreement with the budget as set out by this government. I think it's important, too, to read the actual language in the Supply Act. I think it is important in addressing and outlining my concerns for this.

You know, the actual language contained in the Supply Act says, in the first clause: "From and out of the consolidated revenue fund there may be paid and applied in the manner and at the times the government may determine" — and I think those are important words — the sum of, in this case, almost \$14 billion towards expenses for the public service of the province.

The amount, in itself, is at this point in some question and debate as to whether it's adequate, inadequate. I think just as disturbing is the language here that says that these dollars can be spent in the manner and at the time that the government may determine over the coming months.

The second clause talks about the capital expenditures. Again, the language very specifically outlines that a sum of \$659-odd-million may be paid and applied in the manner and at the times that the government may determine over the coming months.

Again, in this there is this deeply implied agreement with the actual budget as determined and outlined by the government here just recently. We haven't had an opportunity to even adequately debate that. It gives me some grave concern, as we move forward and give the government permission, at the time and in the manner that they deem, to spend these dollars that in fact we're agreeing with something I fundamentally do not agree with, and that is an agreement with the basic budget that the government has outlined at this point.

I believe there are huge inadequacies in the current budget that the government has tabled. The cuts into the future and the manner in which the government has seen fit to deliver this budget in itself does not meet with my approval or support or the support of many of the people in my constituency.

To sit here and then have to determine an approval of a supply act that will spend almost half of that budget that I fundamentally disagree with.... I'd have to say that it concerns me greatly that I would be in a position to have to support this Supply Act. Fundamentally, if I don't support the budget on which it's based, how can I possibly then support the Supply Act that the government has put forward?

[1805]

Certainly, it's been well discussed and documented here in the House that we are going into an election process. I know, fundamentally, that we do have to approve dollars to continue to run the business of this province while we go away and go through this election process, but I think it fair to stand here in the House and to have an opportunity to voice on behalf of my constituents my concern with this.

If we don't approve of the budget and if I do not support the budget as it has currently been tabled by the government, I find it hard to support the Supply Act as they've determined it without adequate scrutiny and without adequate answers from the government on how these dollars are going to be spent — in fact, what the implications are going to be to the many programs that we've seen in the budget itself that are going to be tampered with, cut, underfunded or in some other way inadequately funded by this government.

Is the \$13 billion that's going to be spent by the government as and when in the manner that they see fit...?

That's going to follow the budget that they've outlined at this point. In almost half a year before we'll have a chance to come back here and scrutinize this again or in any way debate this, the government is going to carry on with the regime as laid out by their budget right now, which includes lots of damaging cuts.

I know that my colleague the member for Vancouver-Burrard has been very eloquent in this House in outlining what's happening to the arts community, but that's only the beginning of it. We can see it all across government. We have heard repeatedly across government that there are inadequate funds to meet the requirements and needs of many aspects of the government.

Deputy Speaker: Member, substance of the bill, please. General substance of the bill.

M. Karagianis: Absolutely, Madam Speaker.

So in standing here and debating on the Supply Act, I would have to say that because it is based on the very essential budget that I don't agree with, I have a number of concerns, and I have others that I'll discuss here shortly.

Because we are going into an election process, we know that the business of government will take place without the kind of scrutiny that goes on in here day to day. We will not have that opportunity again. I'm sure that in some few days or weeks the House will rise, and we will go out and fight an election.

Certainly, we saw in the supplemental estimates that we debated in this House.... We did have a lot more opportunity to scrutinize those, and we know for a fact that many of those dollars are going to be used as an election fund to go out and put money into communities with the government hoping to garner support there.

I am concerned and, particularly, expect that the government will understand that not one penny of this Supply Act can be used in any way for the same purposes that we know their supplemental estimates dollars are going to be used. I am concerned because the language in this Supply Act very specifically says that the government can spend these dollars in the manner and at the time that they see fit.

So there are certainly going to be some demands and expectations to continue funding the programs like health care in this province that will continue to need funding and attention of government in the coming five months, but I am not at all confident that the government, with a carte blanche permission to do with these dollars when and as they please.... I have no confidence that some of this may not find its way into programs and things that are not going to have adequate scrutiny from this House.

That concerns me a great deal. It also concerns me that as the government is spending the money as and when they see fit, certainly we could see some of the cuts that are inherent in this budget the government has

delivered carried out over the next five months. I'll talk a little bit further about that, because we've already begun to see some of those implications in the communities across this province and particularly here in the capital.

When we look at the sort of breadth of what the Supply Act language in Bill 5 gives the government, that has for me the deepest danger, and that's where my deepest concern lies. I'd like to say that the other real major concern I have is with the fact that the budget is intrinsically tied to revenue in this province.

[1810]

Certainly, it's no secret that in the last number of months — shall we say the last five months, an equal period of time to what this Supply Act covers — we've seen significant and huge changes in the economy of this province. The economy of the rest of the nation and this continent and the world has been changing rapidly before us for over a year — the last two years, for sure.

But it has only been in the last five months that we've begun to see any dawning of recognition on the government's part that there is a change of circumstances here in British Columbia. If in five months we can go from a government that was bragging about balancing the budget and, "We're not going to suffer here in British Columbia," and we can see that take a nosedive down to the point that we are in a deficit, we have an unknown future as to what kind of revenues will be brought into this province.

If in five months we have seen such an unbelievable change in the fiscal landscape of this province, then what will and could happen in the coming five months? We are about to give the government carte blanche to spend this money as and when it sees fit, in such a tempestuous environment.

The government seemed so completely unable to forecast or foreshadow any aspect of what was happening over the past five months. It was a revelation that arrived on our doorstep only weeks ago.

I mean, the government is so completely out of touch with the reality of what was happening elsewhere in the country and the world that I don't have a great deal of confidence in what will happen in the coming five months, how the government will react to that and how they will take the language in the Supply Act, in Bill 5 — the close to \$15 billion or in excess of \$15 billion that we are giving them carte blanche to spend as and where and when they see fit. Will, in fact, any of these things be a reality five months from now, as the reality has changed so much in the five months preceding this?

I have some deep concerns about what it is that we are doing here and how secure any of this is. I mean, it seems to me that we are living in times that are moving faster and faster into an unknown future, with a government that seems incapable of coming to grips with what is going on in the economy, let alone being open and accountable to us for that.

We've had daily changes within this province in our expectations for the Olympics, in our expectations for incomes in any kind of revenue streams. In Bill 5 we are setting in place.... A significant amount of the provincial spending, almost 50 percent of the provincial spending, is tied up in this Supply Act at a time when we have an unknown fiscal reality facing us in the future, with no particular security or confidence in this government's ability to grasp it, foreshadow it or in any way address it in a way that the citizens of British Columbia have confidence in.

For that reason, standing here looking at this bill, how can we support a supply act that has such a very thin basis in reality? We know that it will cost us probably this or more in the future to keep government services going, but do I have confidence that this government will spend this in a way that's meaningful to my constituents or that, in fact, is going to deal with the future and our ministerial needs and our public service needs without subjecting them to cuts or other political interference?

You know, I would say that one of the things that concerns me greatly, Madam Speaker, is that.... I understand that the public service is being asked in this province to take cuts in either pay or in their workweek. At the same time, the government has made no efforts whatsoever to curb the hundreds of employees that are used in the government's communication and messaging service. There's going to be no attempt to curb them.

[1815]

Deputy Speaker: Member. Member.

M. Karagianis: Madame Speaker, they will be paid from....

Deputy Speaker: Member, relevant to Bill 5.

M. Karagianis: They will be paid from this Supply Act, Bill 5. Part of the \$13.39 billion will go to maintain a full complement of government public relations staff, while at the same time the public service of this province — people who live in my community and live here in the capital — are being asked to go down to a four-day workweek and take a cut in pay to save their jobs.

Madam Speaker, it would seem to me that one fatal flaw already in this Supply Act is that the government itself doesn't think that its PR machine should take any cuts but that the civil servants and public servants that work here in the province of British Columbia should all take a little hit at their expense.

Deputy Speaker: Member, order.

Member, I've asked you to be relevant to the bill, please, on the substance of Bill 5.

M. Karagianis: Madam Speaker, I'm speaking about Bill 5, the Supply Act.

Interjection.

M. Karagianis: I am, at this point.

Deputy Speaker: Continue, Member.

M. Karagianis: In looking at both clause 1 and clause 2 of the Supply Act, these costs are going to be used to defray a whole number of expenses here in the province of British Columbia. Without adequate opportunity to scrutinize that spending over the next five months, we are virtually giving the government carte blanche, as the language in this bill says, to use these funds "in the manner and at the times" that they see fit.

In drawing an analogy between how the government has seen fit to keep a full supply of public relations people on while asking other members of ministries to take a cut, while we look at all the other cuts that are prevalent in this budget, we haven't had a chance to look at that and have adequate confidence that government's ability to spend as and when they wish is, in fact, going to meet the needs of full and accountable scrutiny here in the House. I think my colleagues have discussed that fully.

[Mr. Speaker in the chair.]

The process around spending priorities of government is a very important part of not only the parliamentary process but accountability. Best-practice accountability is having a chance to scrutinize government spending and ask questions about how and when that will be spent.

This interim supply is based on a budget that I fundamentally do not agree with. I'm standing here on behalf of my constituents to say that my confidence in government is gone.

As we move through this process, I'm sure that the confidence of many British Columbians is eroded to the point that they are suspicious, at this point, about an interim supply act that is going to take almost 50 percent of our annual budget and spend this without adequate scrutiny, without the confidence of this side of the House and certainly without the confidence of those people in British Columbia that we all are sent here to stand up for.

Hon. Speaker, my concerns at this point have not in any way diminished, and certainly because the government members have refused to stand up and support or defend this in any way, I have no basis on which to put my concerns aside. In fact, they grow more and more as I listen to the members of this side of the House outline their concerns.

M. Karagianis moved adjournment of debate.

Motion approved.

Hon. B. Penner: With that, I wish all members safe travels back to their constituencies as they work to represent their constituents tomorrow.

Hon. B. Penner moved adjournment of the House.

Motion approved.

Mr. Speaker: This House stands adjourned until 10 a.m. Monday morning.

The House adjourned at 6:20 p.m.

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