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

**FIFTH SESSION, 38TH PARLIAMENT**

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**CONTENTS**

Tuesday, March 10, 2009  
Morning Sitting

**Routine Proceedings**

	<b>Page</b>
Introductions by Members.....	14353
Second Reading of Bills .....	14353
Ministerial Accountability Bases Act, 2008-2009 (Bill 4) ( <i>continued</i> )	
C. Wyse	
B. Ralston	
S. Herbert	
N. Simons	
C. Evans	
H. Lali	
G. Coons	



TUESDAY, MARCH 10, 2009

The House met at 10:03 a.m.

[Mr. Speaker in the chair.]

Prayers.

### Introductions by Members

**C. Trevena:** In the gallery today are five students from Wagalus School in Fort Rupert. They are Rocky Roberts, Jack Van Graven, Lyam Donetz, Jordan Hanuse, Glen Morris, and they're with their teacher Karen Aoki. They're here visiting and touring the Legislature as part of a bit of a visit to the south Island, from Fort Rupert. They're also going to be going out to UVic to see what higher education may hold for them, as well as on their way back up, up-Island, the Vancouver Island University.

I hope the House will make them very welcome.

### Orders of the Day

**Hon. M. de Jong:** I call continued second reading debate of Bill 4.

### Second Reading of Bills

#### MINISTERIAL ACCOUNTABILITY BASES ACT, 2008-2009 (continued)

**C. Wyse:** It is my pleasure to stand up this morning to speak in opposition to this particular bill.

When I arrived in Victoria a number of years ago — and it doesn't seem to be that long ago — I discovered a new spring tradition that has evolved here since I have arrived. I'd like to share it with you, hon. Speaker.

[1005]

If you were to simply use the weather to know when spring has arrived, this year you would be somewhat misled. However, true to record, I know it's springtime because the government has brought forward legislation to make changes to protect the ministerial bonuses. So I do know that spring has arrived, because we have this annual tradition that has developed.

With great fanfare a number of years ago, the government introduced legislation called the Balanced Budget and Ministerial Accountability Act. That was to show the people here in British Columbia that this government was open, it was accountable, and it would hold its cabinet ministers accountable for the cash that was assigned to them on behalf of the people of British Columbia. But what we have seen evolve is a government that doesn't follow that in practice.

[K. Whittred in the chair.]

Speaker, good to see that you have joined me to listen to this spring tradition that has evolved here.

When we look back, we see that this bill has been necessary in 2008, 2007, 2006, 2005 and three times in 2004. So what has developed here in this practice is not openness, not accountability, but fanfare that allows ministers not to be accountable for their actual budgets in practice.

Now, when we go back to 2001 and we see the record, the Liberals started off with, in actual fact, a surplus of \$1.4 billion. From there, they then evolved into a series of budget deficits — three, as a matter of fact — which they referred to as being structural deficits. That was the explanation that was brought forward to implement the political agenda. During that period of time, that explanation was used to implement severe and harsh service cuts across the entire province. Those cuts and the effect upon the budget were worsened with the tax cuts that benefited the wealthy.

We know from analysis of the record.... One of the things that time does allow to happen is the opportunity to go back and study and actually compare the results versus what the intention of the legislation was projected to be. What we have seen as a result of those tax cuts that have led to needs on an annual basis to protect the cabinet ministers and their allowances as in Bill 4 today is a widening in the financial middle-class and lower-class people here in British Columbia. In other words, the 10 percent, the very wealthy here in British Columbia, have increasingly got wealthier, and the vast majority of the population of British Columbia has become poorer.

Research upon research has demonstrated the effect of this government's financial strategy. Now, what does this have to do with the budget? What does this have to do with the bill that is in front of us? The arrogance of this government on an annual ritual of protecting the money paid to the ministers to look after their estimates.... Now, either that's arrogance, or it's out of touch, or even possibly worse yet, it is wilfully deliberate negligence of looking after their ministries.

[1010]

That, in actual fact, is why this bill must be opposed, why it must be spoken against. The government here has established an ongoing, consistent track record. If you look at what the projections are for revenue in '08-09 and '09-10, there are very few people that are agreeing with those estimates of revenue. If you accept what most of the experts are saying, we are now moving into what the government is referring to as strategic deficits.

If the more acceptable analysis is what materializes, then there is going to be the need once more for this legislation to be in front of us again. A more open and transparent government would step forward and

actually remove the original legislation so that we would not need to consistently have this legislation in front of us — legislation that looks after the financial well-being of the affected cabinet ministers.

Given how the moneys have been rolled in, the Finance Minister.... Given those projected revenues, his salary will be on the line.

It is with those comments that I speak against Bill 4. I speak against the track record that is put into place by this government, which has become an annual ritual. The people in British Columbia know that it is spring-time because this government once more introduces the legislation to look after their ministerial cabinet's revenue for their personal gain, rather than recognizing their ineptness in having managed their own budgets.

There are individuals that have recognized this consistency of practice. I would refer to an article by that skilled writer and columnist Vaughn Palmer in March 2007. "It has become an annual ritual in the B.C. Legislature, a government bill excusing cabinet ministers from any financial penalties for missing budget targets."

That's 2007. We are now in 2008, and the experts say this government that proposes to be a proponent of openness and transparency will be back again — this time, not as government but on the other side. With that, I close in opposition to this bill.

**B. Ralston:** This bill is put forward, as the previous speaker said, annually. Really, I think what members on this side want to point out is the pattern that's emerged.

When the government came into power, they promised tough budgetary measures where ministers would be held accountable. If they went over their budget, there would be financial consequences. That was the rhetorical flourish that we heard and continue to hear, but what this bill does is let those ministers off the hook.

There's a contradiction in what the government has said. On the one hand, they promised ministerial accountability. On the other hand, there's money at the end of the year. They want to spend it, even though they haven't budgeted for it at the beginning of the fiscal year. This measure that we're dealing with here reconciles all those contradictory pieces of rhetoric and lets those ministers off the hook.

[1015]

It's been a consistent pattern since this legislation came into effect, and no minister has ever lost that portion of their ministerial holdback, as it's called. I believe the present number is about \$4,000. So the gap between the rhetoric and the reality is very apparent in this bill. It's not a bill that gets a great deal of publicity. The government certainly doesn't talk about it very much, but that's the reality of what takes place.

When you look at the number of ministers, there are.... I'm just going to briefly list them. They're set out in section 1 of this bill: the Minister of Advanced Education

and Labour Market Development; the Minister of Community Development; the Minister of Finance; the Minister of Forests and Range; Minister of Health Services; Minister of Housing and Social Development; Minister of Labour and Citizens' Services; Minister of Public Safety and Solicitor General; Minister of Tourism, Culture and the Arts; Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure. So that's a sizeable number of members of the cabinet who will have that portion of their salary saved.

Now, the members on the government side will point out that this bill merely adjusts the spending to take account of supplementary estimates. That's a process that comes before the House. There was a debate on the supplementary estimates in this session.

That is a legitimate and fair point, but I think the overarching point here is the hypocrisy, really, of making the claim that you're going to be tough on ministerial accountability, hold ministers to their budget and yet devise a process which suits the inclination to spend extra revenue and let the ministers off the hook.

Really, this process is.... We engage the full mechanisms of the Legislature. We spend time here. There's a bill put forward. There's some debate. The bill is printed up. We have, I suppose, committee stage, if we get to that and when we get to that.

All of those processes, all that time, all that expense is put into this effort merely to save each of these individual members the sum of \$4,000. So it does seem to me to be a rather cost-ineffective way to make that point, and really, it clashes with the rhetoric that we've heard on this point about ministerial accountability for spending for so many years.

It has become an annual tradition. It's here again, and I think the number of ministers this year is probably a little bit longer than it was last year. Nothing has really changed. The pattern is clear. It's not to say that in individual cases, in individual ministries.... For example, in the Ministry of Forests, if the fire season is longer than expected and more money has to be expended, although there's usually some attempt to predict that, that's something that I think is a legitimate requirement — to spend more money in order to put out forest fires. That leads to a greater spending in that particular ministry, and I don't think anyone would begrudge the Minister of Forests that particular way out, given....

Interjection.

**B. Ralston:** I see the Minister of Forests is applauding my point, and I'm glad he agrees with that. It's probably the only occasion on which he has expressed agreement with what I'm saying.

But for the most part, aside from those individual cases, it really is the pattern that gives rise to, I think, the concern that we express on this side — that this process is really unnecessary. If it's meant to enforce the

point, it's a very ineffective way of enforcing and making the point that ministers are to be held accountable for spending in their ministry. That is the essence of the parliamentary tradition.

[1020]

This grafting on to that in the way in which it has operated over the years has really not been very useful and speaks to, I think, the essential hypocrisy and lack of necessity of this particular process. So with those remarks, Madam Speaker, I would resume my place.

**S. Herbert:** I rise to speak about Bill 4, the Ministerial Accountability Bases Act, 2008-2009. I've been watching this House for many years and have noticed a historical kind of tradition — something which I know that the member for Surrey-Whalley, the member for Cariboo South, the member for Port Coquitlam-Burke Mountain have all mentioned in this place — and that's the Ministerial Accountability Bases Act, the "Covering our butts act," as it could be called.

I hear some laughter from the other side, and maybe that's what this act really is. It seems to be that this act had a nice idea behind it, which is that if ministers don't meet their budget — if they go over budget — then they get cuts to salary. It was supposed to kind of excite them into action to watch out for taxpayers' dollars and to make sure that their budgets came in as they suggested they would.

I believe that this act has now come in seven times, which kind of puts the lie to the idea that this act is working and is doing what it should be. It seems this is another piece of, I guess I would say, government spin, make-believe — hope that people don't read too far beyond the headline.

I think that's disappointing, because the idea is not a bad one. The idea of an open, accountable government is a great idea that we should all aim for, and aim high. As some of my colleagues were speaking, I heard members opposite say: "Well, what about your friends in the '90s?" and "Oh, what about this other time?" and "What about that?" and "What about that?"

That seems to be a pretty common response. Anytime there might be a legitimate criticism of the government, they point to somebody else, and they say: "Well, you were just as bad" or "Your friends were just as bad" or "Somebody was just as bad." I think that's an interesting argument and an interesting suggestion, but unfortunately, it fails the people of British Columbia in a very real way.

We would never say to our children: "Oh well, you can get away with beating up this kid here because he also beat up a different kid over there, and so you are just as bad, and everything's fine." We need to be aiming higher and reaching higher, as I believe I hear a government slogan sometimes used, to be doing better for the people of British Columbia in a real way rather than spinning and pointing fingers at other people. That's not how we do that.

I know that British Columbians certainly are tired of people being let off the hook. We've certainly seen that a lot in the criminal justice system lately, with people seeming to get out on bail in the gang wars that we've been seeing, where they very obviously have broken the law but get away with it. People don't like that, and they don't like that from their government.

So when we seem to be aiming for accountability... We should have accountability, real accountability — one where you say what you mean, and you follow through on what actions are supposed to happen to you. But again here we have Bill 4, which seems to change the rules after the action has been done so that people can slip the hook and sneak away. So you change the estimates from the past; you change the history. You change the past; you revise the history.

I seem to remember from my days of studying history and social studies that there were a lot of discussions about changing the past and about how various governments of various stripes liked to do that. A certain government would take a picture and edit out the photos of certain people that no longer were favourable to that government, and that was a thing which they thought was great and that they could get away with by rewriting history. We all know that that government fell, and rightly so — and I speak of the government of Russia, of the Soviet Union — because that was a horrific practice.

[1025]

I think this pales in comparison, for sure, but I think it's similar when a government tries to change history. People should be outraged, and they should be upset about changing history. This government seems to very good at changing history, about speaking about a period before this government was elected as the worst time ever in history — the dismal decades — and then pointing at that decade when they're criticized and saying: "Well, you guys did that too" or "You guys are not as good as we were in the past."

I'm tired of hearing of this past where they go on again about the past and refuse to acknowledge their own deficits and their own difficulties and their own challenges. We all must acknowledge challenges and problems, and that's how we get better. That's how we, as the representatives of the people of British Columbia, make our way forward in a positive way, in a way where we can actually respect the intelligence of British Columbians to know when they're being spun and put one over on. But this government doesn't seem to do that. They seem to think that spin and rhetoric are acceptable in absence of substance and reality.

I heard some members opposite speak earlier about transparency and that they're a transparent government. Well, maybe they mean that it is transparent. What they're doing is trying to spin the public and get their way out of losing salary. I know that in the private sector, in the non-profit sector, in the public sector, that kind of behaviour is not approved of or

accepted. It's the wrong way forward, and it's the wrong thing to do.

If they think that transparency is getting away with it in a very blatant and obvious way, well, maybe that's transparent. But it's clear that the reality of this Ministerial Accountability Bases Act is really about covering butts and escaping from the criticism.

I heard earlier the discussion about forestry and about how sometimes you cannot predict a forest fire. Well, of course we know that, and we understand that. I think that's one reality which can be covered in such an act as we've got coming up today.

Certainly, budget overruns for a number of projects and estimates which really do not reflect reality are not covered by this act — or shouldn't be but are so that people can make their money, their high taxpayer-supported salaries. That leads to questions, because there are a lot of people in our province who make very little money.

I was out this weekend in my constituency of Vancouver-Burrard, on the street doing my meet-and-greet with constituents. They told me about how challenging it is for them to meet their budgets. But if they don't meet their budgets, they're the ones that suffer. They don't have a government stepping in and helping them pay off their debts, helping them top up their salary, if they don't quite make it. Instead, they end up subsidizing it through cutting back on their food budget. That's a real challenge, because inequality has gotten worse and worse in this province, and we see that in study after study.

I think this Ministerial Accountability Bases Act is kind of a funny reflection of that reality. When a minister can't meet their budget, the government steps in and saves their butts. Certainly, we've seen that with a number of the insiders and friends of this government. When they can't quite do it, they get supported. But when a single mother can't quite do it, too bad. When somebody on disability can't quite do it, too bad. When somebody working full-time at minimum wage can't do it, too bad.

That's the reality of this government, of creating two economies: one for the government and its friends; and one for the rest of us who, many times, can't quite make it, because the inequality has gotten so bad, with things like child poverty being the worst in Canada. So this Ministerial Accountability Bases Act kind of reflects that reality, in a very real way, of a lack of transparency, of a lack of accountability and of pointing fingers elsewhere: "It's somebody else's fault; just give me my money."

[1030]

I think that's a disappointing failure and one that's yet again about putting one over on the taxpayer but really about putting one over on the citizens of British Columbia. They hope that they're too busy working full-time jobs to be watching us on Hansard here, to be

watching at home, to be watching on the Internet, and they think that they can sneak one past us, as has been the case seven times now.

Maybe they think that through history, people will just give up and will just go: "Okay, this is common practice now." Certainly, we've seen in history that if a bad thing is done again and again, sometimes people forget about it, and sometimes they think: "Oh, this is just the way business gets done. I don't like it, but it's what my government does to me and does to this province."

That's partly why, I think, there's such apathy in our world today, why people say: "Well, I guess I'll take the bad thing even though I know there could be a good reality, but I'm so worn down that I guess I'll just give up and give in to what's been going on." Well, I'm sick of it, and people in this province are sick of it.

We need to take back B.C. and make it about accountable, open government. A government that respects people. A government that brings people together. A government that listens. A government that puts their priorities first and recognizes that oh, oops, if the government makes a big blunder, they should recognize it, speak about it and pay for the challenge, pay for that screwup, not pass a bases act — a "covering our butts" act — and sneak around through the back doors.

**Hon. M. Coell:** Tell us what the NDP did.

**S. Herbert:** Oh, and I hear the minister opposite. He loves to say: "Well, tell us about you guys in the past." I think he's just acknowledging that this is a screwup on their part. They like to point at somebody else and say: "Oh well, you made the same problem back in the past." You know, saying, "You made a problem, we made a problem, so it's all equal" — that's failure. That's failure when you try and pretend that something else is okay because somebody else, you claim, did the same thing so we're fine.

Last time, I seem to remember, when I was a small boy, my mother would say: "You cannot get away with saying, 'Well, he screwed up too,' to justify your screwups." It doesn't work that way. It's not how anybody gets better. It's not how you learn from each other. That's a road of mistakes.

Somehow this government seems to believe that after eight years in power, it's okay to just say, "Well, somebody else did something, I think, and maybe they're wrong too" and "Oh, you're dismal; you're horrible people, so we can be horrible as well," and that somehow you win in that situation. You don't win in that situation.

As everybody said, two wrongs don't make a right. I guess for this government, "Subtract, subtract, subtract, wrong, wrong, wrong" seems to....

**An Hon. Member:** Seven wrongs.

**S. Herbert:** Seven wrongs, seven times of covering the butt so that you don't actually have to follow through on your own laws — that does not make a right. That makes a failure, and that makes it a government that's hiding from its own legislation, hiding from its own ideals, hiding from the fact that British Columbians want an open and accountable government. They want a government that will listen to them and will act on their behalf, not cover their butts.

I think I'm learning about this House very quickly. I've not been here long, but maybe that's a good thing, because I can see this place in a way that some other members, especially on the government side, cannot see it, and that this House operates in a way designed to hide the truth from the people. It's designed by calling things Ministerial Accountability Bases Act.

It sounds like a good thing. We all want ministers to be accountable, but the act itself makes it so that they're unaccountable, so that they can sneak away and hide. It's another: fun with language, fun with numbers. This is millions and millions of dollars of taxpayers' money, which has been put in places which maybe it shouldn't have been, blown on things which probably it shouldn't have been.

Then the ministers get off the hook with their big salaries, their high-priced salaries. These are people that are supposed to be leading the way in this province. These are people who are supposed to be watching out for us — hon. members, I believe we refer to the ministers as. I think honour requires you to admit when there are problems. Honour means that you would admit when you make a mistake.

Honour is not pointing at somebody else and saying: "Well, you were just as bad" or "You were a bad people too, so we can all be bad together." That's not how this House should work. This House should be about: "Okay, we made an error" or "Okay, we're going to fix that error" or "Okay, I need to take a bit of a salary cut."

[1035]

It's certainly not going to hurt people, a salary cut like this. The salaries that we make in this place are high. I'm used to living on a student salary until very recently, where I'd get by on \$12,000 a year. I see some of the hon. members recoil. That's not easy, but many in B.C. do get by on very, very low salaries like that and get squeezed.

I seem to remember minimum wage as being a big problem. Well, I don't "seem to remember" it. People come up to talk to me about it all the time. They tell me that it's a problem for them and that they can't get by.

They don't get why we here in this House seem to cover our butts whenever we want, whenever we can, and why ministers can raise their salaries, why MLAs can raise their salaries, why the Premier can massively raise his salary. Meanwhile, they're struggling to make ends meet.

They're struggling to pay their debts, to pay their budgets, to make their household budgets. But we can

escape from any scrutiny here, whereas they cannot escape from scrutiny there. The collection agency phones. Their house is foreclosed on. Their car is taken away.

There is incredibly high debt load in this province, but the government seems to think that it's okay to cover their own butts instead of making sure that people in B.C. are getting ahead together, that the people in B.C. are making sure that they can pay their debts, that they can pay their bills, that they can build a bright future for their families, for their children, for their parents — that they can do that together in a real, concerted way.

I think if I was a kid and I said to my parents, "Oh well, I spent all of your money. I know I promised not to. I made a big error, but jeez, don't ground me, because that kid across the street is bad, too. He did something 20 years ago, and it was horrible. Just let me off the hook..."

I don't think they would let me off the hook. I think I would get a major grounding, as I should, as ministers should when they make mistakes and don't follow through on their own stated goals and targets. I think that's something that people understand.

People understand that there needs to be a rule of law. They don't understand how we here in this House can always get away with changing the goalposts, how we can change the goalposts to fit whoever wants, so that they can escape scrutiny, so they can escape actually having to deal with the truth that they made a mistake.

Here we had, earlier in this session, the law around balanced budgets. "Oh well, let's change that law that we created with such fanfare to escape from any accountability on following that balanced budget law so that we don't end up breaking the law. Oh well, let's change this rule here. Let's change this bill here, so we don't end up having to take a salary cut, even though we said that we would. We said: 'We're looking out for you. We care about you, and we are the most open and accountable government.'"

Well, you're not. This government is not. This government seems to sneak away from accountability at every case.

**G. Coons:** Slither away.

**S. Herbert:** "Slither away," I hear an hon. member mention.

That leads to disillusionment about what this place is and leads to disillusionment about what government is. "The best place on earth to slither away from accountability." Maybe that could be the government's slogan. That's certainly not a slogan which gets me happy, makes me proud.

I notice that the neglect of this government includes neglecting to follow their own rules. The out-of-touch approach of this government means they're so out of touch that they believe they should change their rules, so they can sneak away from them.

The arrogant approach of this government means that it calls an act the Ministerial Accountability Bases Act, but the act does just about anything but. It covers their bases so that they don't take a salary cut, but it makes sure not to cover the bases of every British Columbian by hiding from the truth that they made a mistake.

It's okay that you make mistakes. People do it, but you've got to face up and realize that in making mistakes, you should come clean on those mistakes. You should come clean with the true costs. You should come clean and say: "Okay, I'm going to take a salary cut, because it's the honourable thing to do."

Now, maybe the hon. members opposite on the government side of the House will get up to speak on this bill, but we've certainly seen that normally on bills like this, there's very little discussion from the government side about why it's justified. They feel that by not talking, by ducking the issue, there will be no conflict. People won't pay attention, and it'll slide through as it has seven times.

[1040]

Well, I'm disappointed that this is the approach of this government. I'm disappointed that they feel that they can slide it through yet again like they've done so many times in the past. That disrespects the reality of what average British Columbians are facing today. It disrespects, I believe, the role of legislators, which is to be open, which is to be honest, which is to tell the truth and tell it like it is. That's what people want.

On that note, I will be giving up my place in this debate because I believe I've made my point. I've tried to make it a few times in a number of ways so that they can understand it and so that the hon. members opposite can take the honourable approach and say that this bill probably doesn't need to come forward this way and that they will take the salary cuts which they legislated for themselves when they make mistakes.

**N. Simons:** Here we go again. We're in the House debating a piece of legislation that undoes a previous piece of legislation that was introduced with great fanfare, with great pride and with great publicity in order to make a point about a particular government. Unfortunately, in the private sector we call that false advertising. In government, apparently, it's called just passing an amnesty bill to excuse ministers for overrunning their budget.

Unfortunately, that seems to be a pattern that we've seen year after year after year in this government. They pass a law that makes them appear to be responsible managers of our finances, and then in an early morning session they'll vote for a bill that excuses them from the promises they seem to have made to the public of British Columbia. Not just a promise — a legislated promise. A promise that they've put into legislation.

We were here not that long ago talking about the budget, talking about the accountability and pointing

out that they promised a balanced budget. Then they had to make a law that says: "We don't really promise it. We're changing the rules halfway through the game."

I think the member for Vancouver-Burrard mentioned the apathy in the province because of the notion that government doesn't really do what it says it's going to do. I think that sort of leads to cynicism, and cynicism is one of the most destructive forces when it comes to government and the running of the province, essentially.

When you have bills like this.... This is the fifth year in a row that the government has put forward a bill to ask for permission to break their own rules, essentially. It's one thing if circumstances were such that they could not predict that these rules would be broken, but they could. They could.

Instead, at the beginning of the process they pass laws saying: "Look how good we are. This is what we're going to do." They do it amid great fanfare and self-promotion and pats on their own backs. Then later on when perhaps the fanfare has died away and the sound is just echoes in the long hallways, we see a government saying: "Well, we were just kidding" or "We were just hoping" and "We were just sort of pretending."

I don't think that the people of British Columbia should be subjected to this kind of unaccountability or lack of accountability. It's not what the people of British Columbia want to see. They want to see honesty in government. They want to see a government that does what it says it's going to do. Instead, we see a government that changes its mind halfway through.

You're not allowed to change the rules of a game, of a sport halfway through the game and say, "Well, right now we're going to call.... Every goal is going to be two goals," or anything like that. We have a situation here where government says that the ministers are going to be accountable for their budgets, and if they go over that budget, they will not get their bonus payments. It has happened seven times, I believe — seven times in this administration's tenure — that they've changed the rules after they've broken them.

You know, that's unfortunate because they are the only people who can do that for themselves. It's just another example, really, that this government is not accountable to itself. While it has the flowery words about ministerial accountability, it's really ministerial amnesty. It's another amnesty for ministers to get off the hook for mistakes or for bad planning.

[1045]

If it's not mistakes and if it's not bad planning, then maybe it was wilful. Maybe it was wilful at the time of the original passing of the act that they said they'll do this and that they'll get the nice headlines. They'll be self-promoting, and they'll say: "Look how good we are. Look at what we're doing." Then later on, they knew it was going to come. They've done it seven times. They're becoming expert in breaking their own rules.

Did they not predict it? Did they not predict it the first time they had to break the rules to allow ministers to get their bonuses? Did they not expect it again after the second time and the third time and the fourth time and the fifth time and the sixth time? Here we are at the seventh time.

In between, we also have a law that says: "Oh, on that balanced-budget legislation? We're going to throw that one out too." These are the fundamental questions that British Columbians are asking: is this government just moving the goalposts as they go along? Unfortunately, the evidence is before us today in Bill 4 that, in fact, that's simply what they're doing. They're bringing in a bill. They're calling it Ministerial Accountability Bases Act.

It reminds me of the Orwellian use of language. They're saying "ministerial accountability" when it is actually ministerial excusability, ministerial "sorry we made a mistake" ability. And we want to make sure that people are out there making that known.

This is spin-doctoring by legislation. It doesn't have a place in this Legislature. I believe that this is probably the quintessential example of how this government has used words to fool the public, has used words to make it seem like this government is actually accountable, responsible and acting in the best interests of the public.

But really, when you look carefully at those announcements early on in the administration about openness and accountability, this is really the signal that that openness and accountability was just — I don't think I'm allowed to use the word "fraud" — fraudulent in terms of how the public perceived it. They were led to believe that....

**Deputy Speaker:** Member. I think that you did admonish yourself, and I recommend that you withdraw that.

**N. Simons:** I withdraw that comment. I'm often self-critical, and in this particular case, I admonish myself for using that terminology.

But I think that the point I'd like to make is that the people of British Columbia were led to believe — and, I believe, led to believe inaccurately — that the budget the government would pass would be the one that they would be accountable for. In fact, the budgets that the government passes are simply templates, or they're simply blueprints, that will later be edited prior to completion.

So what we have here is yet more excuses that come far enough after the actual original legislation to say: "Well, we weren't really planning that well. We probably should have anticipated that we would not be able to meet our budgets, because it's happened seven times." Yet the government seems to be insistent on continually passing legislation that is really just style over substance. It's just more of the house of cards, more of this illusion instead of actually doing what they say they're going to do.

I'm troubled by it, like the members who have spoken before me. I think that it's not appropriate use of legislation to make it into a big public relations exercise. I've seen the government do more public relations exercises than I've seen in the past, and I think that it adds to the cynicism that we have about politics.

We see massive expenditures in places where the people of British Columbia probably wouldn't like to see it. We see the common wealth that we have, as a people of British Columbia, being sold off. That should be clear to the public too, with the bills that they passed and the legislation that they passed. But it isn't, because we're led to believe one thing and a different thing happens. And not just once. Five years in a row.

We've had, so far with this government, three deficits and four surpluses, and it looks to me like, with the last budget and the next one, they were going to have five deficits and four surpluses.

[1050]

This government has failed in terms of meeting the standards it has set for itself, by doing that. They just come along later and change those standards. They say that they're going to do something, and later on they say: "Well, yeah, we said we were going to do something, but now we're saying we're not going to do that."

We have ministers who are going to benefit from that. I would consider that sort of word trickery, and it's not helpful to the people of British Columbia. So the Ministerial Accountability Bases Act isn't really about accountability. It's about avoiding accountability. It's about getting out of the way of accountability. To me, that's just the ultimate in hypocrisy. Unfortunately, we've seen that happen seven times.

For seven times, the people of British Columbia were told that every minister was personally responsible for their budget, and seven times, those ministers were let off the hook by legislation that says that they're not really accountable for their budget. I find that problematic. I think the people of British Columbia, when they are told about this — and I think that they should be — will see that, oh, that's just another trick. It's just another trick. We're being bamboozled again. Yes, the people of British Columbia are being bamboozled again.

It's my responsibility as a member of the opposition to point out that whether or not it's an appropriate action, they should not be going ahead and publicizing their ability to do things well when, in fact, the evidence suggests that they don't.

With that, I think I've made my point. I think this is cynical legislation that is passed yet again to exonerate ministers from the responsibility that they promised they would have, that exonerates them from the commitments they've made to the people of British Columbia. It gets them off the hook for the mistakes they've made, and it grants them amnesty. I think it only makes it more troubling by the fact that they were so proud of their

early announcements which said that they would always adhere to the principles they purportedly supported in the past.

Thank you, Madam Speaker, for the opportunity. With that, I cede the floor to another one of my colleagues.

**C. Evans:** I rise today to discuss Bill 4, which is called the Ministerial Accountability Bases Act, 2008-2009. For the benefit of people for whom that might be an esoteric title, it is essentially the bill that allows some ministers of the Crown to overspend last year's budget.

I just want to talk a little bit about the Ministry of Forests, and specifically about the fact that the Ministry of Forests, I think, is overspending its budget by \$111 million. It's not, I don't think, the fault of the minister or the employees of the ministry. Long before there was a ministry accountability act, it was the habit in this place that the Minister of Forests was allowed an open-ended budget in fire season to fight fire.

When we had a ministry accountability act, it suggested that stuff like floods or fire or public emergencies could be handled within a predictable budget, which of course has never been true and will never be true. But the \$111 million overspending of the fire budget is perhaps justifiable and understandable and fine this year because we had an excessive fire season. I think the ministry spent twice the ten-year, decade-long rolling average of fire expenditures.

[1055]

The reason I'm on my feet, though, is because I want to question how we fight fire. If we have accountability in how we spend money, then it would behoove us periodically to talk about whether or not we're spending money in the right way.

I have a special interest in the fire budget, partially because lots of it gets spent where I live in the West Kootenay. We tend, every fall in the season of lightning strikes, to have forest fires, and the Crown spends lots of money putting them out. But I also want to talk about it because it's something I care about from personal life experience. Before I came to work here, I used to fight fire regularly. I logged for a living, and loggers used to fight fire.

So I fought fire out of logging camps. I fought fire out of helicopter camps from the top of the mountain. I fought fire where you'd go to work in a crummy every day — and all different kinds of ways. In my family, it sort of carried on. My son, Philip, was a water bomber pilot for five years. So we talk about it.

Way more than that, though, my constituents talk to me about it. In the period of time that I've worked here, everything has changed about how we fight fire. Before I came here, let's say in the 1970s and '80s, we used to have ranger stations. Do you remember ranger stations? We had buildings in every town, and inside the buildings, there was equipment. There were forest rangers. Those were folks who understood working in the bush.

When there was a forest fire, we would tend to shut down logging. The loggers had an economic interest in putting out the fire, because they couldn't go logging until the fire went out. So the forest ranger would phone all the loggers in the community, or sometimes they would just drive there voluntarily. I used to sleep on the lawn of the Lardeau forest ranger station, which doesn't exist anymore. All the young people would take their sleeping bags and go sleep on the lawn. When there was lightning, we'd drive to the ranger station, because we knew that in the morning, there would be jobs.

But the last 20 years have been kind of.... In the whole world, it's been the time when we've had a love affair with technology. We thought that technology would solve all kinds of problems. It's true in the military. Remember the last time they had a war in Iraq? They had what they called smart bombs, and soldiers didn't have to go face each other. They had technology to blow stuff up with computers.

Similarly, in the forest industry, we thought: "Oh well. We don't need human beings anymore. We can lay off the rangers. And we don't need a ranger station anymore, we can sell the property. Then on top of the mountain, we'll put a fancy machine that keeps track of where all the lightning strikes go, and then in Kamloops or somewhere, there'll be a big computer, and it'll say where to go look. The morning after the lightning strikes, we'll fly around and look at each one of those recorded computer-generated strikes and see if there's a fire. Then we'll monitor that fire and see if we actually have to fight it, because it might just go out." As a result of that, hon. Speaker, we don't need forest rangers, and we don't need ranger stations.

Then we went one step further. I don't know if this was the compensation board or just somebody's good idea, but somebody decided that if you're a logger or a kid growing up in a logging community, you don't qualify to fight a fire. You can kill trees, tip them over, run a power saw, go run a bulldozer, but you don't qualify to fight a fire. You have to go to school to get a piece of paper that says you can fight a fire.

[1100]

So in recent years we've had this complete erosion of the Forest Service's ability to actually go fight fires, and now computers decide if there's a lightning strike. There's nobody up there in that lookout. Remember lookout stations, hon. Speaker? There used to be.... People would get a summer job and go climb a lookout station — actually a human being. Now there's a machine. A big thing sits on a mountain somewhere, and it decides.

Then there's an airplane, and the airplane has to be paid for. An airplane is not cheap. Then it flies around to see if there's a fire. If there's a fire, they tell the ranger, but the ranger can't fight the fire. The ranger has to submit a report and say whether or not he thinks the fire will get bigger or smaller. Besides that, the ranger can't phone

all of his friends, because his friends don't have a piece of paper.

If you actually have a fire, you have to phone a contractor, and the contractor supplies the labour, not the Forest Service. The contractor supplies the pumps. We used to... The Forest Service had pumps. We maintained them in the wintertime. Now the contractor owns all that, so you have to rent it. It becomes very expensive to go fight the fire, because you've got to phone the contractor, and they bring all the stuff.

[S. Hammell in the chair.]

What tends to happen is that when the lightning strike hits the mountain, we don't do anything for a few days, because it's really expensive to hire some people. You've got to hire the contractor to go out there, climb up and put out the fire. So we just let it be.

Much like the rest of the world — I'm not saying that British Columbia is any different — we decided that really big technology was even better than little technology. So instead of using a pulaski.... Do you know what a pulaski is? It's a heavy hoe. On one side it's a hoe, and on the other side it's an axe. You can use the axe end to cut through roots and the hoe end to dig down to mineral soil.

That's how we used to put out fires. We built a big ditch around it. There aren't very many folks out there with pulaskis, and they don't have the piece of paper. Besides, the pulaskis all belong to the contractors. So the Forest Service person doesn't do anything. When the fire starts, we make a phone call, and we engage the air war.

That's what my constituents call it. They're quite bitter. They say: "We used to fight fire. Now we have the air war." Minimum 600 bucks an hour and going on up to, I think, \$10,000 for a Sikorsky and the like. But the air war means that we don't put people on the fire if we can avoid it. We use hugely expensive machinery to pick up water in lakes and take it up and dump it on the fire, sometimes with retardant.

That costs buckets of money. But way more than that, it's the fact that it has to be a big enough fire to justify. I mean, the minister is not going to let you just phone up and send a helicopter on a spot fire. The minister wants a big fire.

Hon. Speaker, I want to speak in my constituents' voice, and I'm talking hundreds of them. I don't wish to suggest that I understand, but my constituents believe that they understand that we now let the fires burn — not on purpose but just sort of because that's the way that we've evolved. We let the fires burn until they're big enough to engage the air war.

Now you're into a situation where it's thousands of dollars an hour, and you've got a big fire. We have an \$111 million overrun, and I submit that not once in the last quarter-century has anybody sat down to figure out

whether the old-fashioned system where you use human beings and make work for people or the new-fangled system where you use helicopters, water bombers and the Mars bombers is cheaper for society or better for fighting fire. I wonder if we would have an \$111 million overrun if we still used human beings to fight fire.

There's another thing. When you're 20 years old, how are you going to learn to get up in the morning, to get a job? How are you going to learn the skills of how to stay alive? Traditionally, in the olden days, it was plant trees and fight fire. Nowadays, that firefighting job tends to be not available because we have moved to the air war.

[1105]

We have a whole generation of loggers' kids and anybody growing up in rural towns, and it's August, and you say to them: "There's a lightning strike. Go to work." They say: "I don't have the ticket." Even if they have the ticket, the Forest Service may decide it's an air war job, not a human being job. So we're declining work for people and paying the highest possible price to put out the fire.

I even think there's a biological connection here. In British Columbia since, I don't know, say 1950 — certainly since the end of World War II — we have had a policy, essentially, of putting out all the fires, not because it was necessarily the right thing to do but because we now had the capacity. We had airplanes, and we had technology, and we knew how to do it.

We put out all the fires, and when nature is left to her own devices, we tend to burn openings in the forest and burn up the waste — the wood that dies prematurely in the forest. But when you put out all the fires all the time, then there are no openings, and there's no reduction of the fuel. Then when a fire starts, it's a hazard to people because it can burn right to Slocan City or right to Nakusp or right to Nelson or right to Castlegar, because all those towns are built in or on the border of the forest.

In the East Kootenay there are now fuels from Canal Flats all the way south to the American border. Some people say that if the East Kootenay ever did start, all of the towns would be at risk because we've allowed the fuel to build up to the point.... It's very dry, and the timber is very small, and it tends to burn very hot, and you have what's called a crown fire, which is fire burning in the crown of the trees with wind.

I was in a crown fire once. It's probably the most terrifying thing that can happen. Just the roar makes you think it's the end of the world. By building up fuels all over rural British Columbia, we now put ranches and farms and villages and small towns and cities at risk. But we can't go out and manage that and begin controlled burns and the like because we don't fight fire anymore with people. We don't have people with the skills. We use the air war. So now we can't intervene with human skills and make jobs.

I mean, you can employ tens of thousands of unemployed British Columbians, should you decide to manage

the overburden of fuels that we have developed. But we tend not to have the skills. The ranger station isn't there. The ranger isn't there. The old guy with the understanding of the drafts and the winds and the nature of the topography isn't there. We have the air war instead.

I'm on my feet because last year we spent \$111 million above budget. I mean, if that's what it takes to put out the fires, I'm all for it, and the minister is a wonderful person. But I submit that it might be because we have chosen the most technologically advanced and expensive way to put out fires ever known to people.

I would like to suggest that.... It is so insulting. Imagine how the logger feels when we, the Crown, say: "You can't go to work in the village or on the edge of the village where you live." A forest fire is sort of a dangerous thing. It's kind of a romantic thing. When it happens, the natural instinct of a human being is to go put it out, especially to protect home, neighbours, property, community. But in the air war system we say to the logger: "You can't. You haven't got the piece of paper, and you're not in charge." Of course, the forest ranger isn't in charge either. It's somebody far away.

The last time there was a fire in Slocan City, I think, was last summer. I think it's actually part of this \$111 million. I could see it from my house — a huge fire. It looked like a bomb going off right above the village. I'm the MLA. I'm responsible. I get in my truck, and I drive up there. I turned off on a logging road. I've logged there. It's Springer Creek road. I'm partially responsible for the clearcuts up there. I'm driving up the Springer Creek road, one kilometre, two kilometres, three kilometres, four kilometres. I'm getting closer to the smoke, and I don't see a human being.

[1110]

Finally, about, I don't know, six or seven kilometres up, I come upon a guy in a pickup truck. He's the foreman for Slocan Forest Products now called.... I forget. Springer Creek, I think.

The foreman jumps out of his truck and says: "What are you doing here?" I said: "I've come to make sure we got it organized to fight the fire."

He says: "Fight the fire? I've been told I gotta go home. We have to wait for a fire boss to come from Quebec to tell us how to fight the fire. My biggest concern is I've got three plantations up here. I care about those trees. I got them planted in the ground four, six or ten years ago. They're nice little trees that have grown into forests. It's my kids' job, and they're burning up right now. But we're not allowed to fight the fire. The rules say we can't fight the fire."

Then I come upon a guy with a water truck, which is really just a gravel truck with a huge water tank on the back, getting money by the hour to put out the fire. He's driven up there on entrepreneurial speculation that he can have a job putting out the fire. The forester says: "Park your truck on the side of the road. We're not ready

yet. We gotta wait for the guy to come from Quebec to tell us how to fight the fire. Besides, we don't have any helicopters here. They're all busy. We can't put out the fire without helicopters. You people aren't the point."

So it turned into a big fire, and that's okay. Fires are okay. But then we all watched, and it's thousands of dollars a minute while the logging community is sitting in the village going: "How come I can't fight the fire?"

Last year there was a little fire in Edgewood just above the power plant across the Arrow Lakes. Everybody saw it. People don't like forest fires, so 13 people phoned in to the Forest Service and said: "Hey, there's a fire across the lake." The Forest Service said: "We know. Thank you for telling us."

Then we watched it. It wasn't big enough to fight. We just watched it. One day the winds came up, and now you've got a big fire. The Whatshan power plant and the power lines are in danger, so phone the water bombers.

I got to ride in the helicopter. Here's another thing this \$111 million pays for. It's MLAs in a helicopter to watch us fight the fire. I'm in the helicopter watching the water bomber trying to hit the Whatshan.... The pilot was wonderful — just crash. It didn't stop the fire, of course. We burned the power lines off, and Nakusp didn't have any power for three days.

But the people said: "Well, 13 of us phoned you three days ago. How come we didn't put some people, climb up there with a pulaski and put out the fire?" Meanwhile, logging stops on the Arrow Lakes because the loggers aren't allowed to fight the fire, but they can't go to work while the fire is burning.

I really would like the Minister of Forests, maybe the Minister of Finance and maybe the Minister of Environment to rethink if technology is a better fire-fighting tool than human beings, if we might not like to make jobs, especially jobs for young people who've got to learn to go to work and learn to stay alive, and to end this humiliation of the logging community that makes them think we think they're too stupid to fight fire.

I get it that there's risk, and I don't want somebody to get up and say: "Oh, you can't do that. There's risk in fighting fire. If you let people that aren't trained or have been to university fight the fire, they might get hurt or put some people at risk."

Well, logging is risky. The rule of thumb is that there are no stupid old fallers, because if you're stupid, you don't make it that far. Why not accept some risk? The people in the airplane have some risk. Do you think when my kid was flying those planes I didn't wonder every day: "Is he going to hit a mountain someday?"

I think we spent \$111 million above budget in the wrong way. I would like this whole House — government and opposition — to rethink this alienation from the land base that we are imposing on the people who live there in our rush to a technological solution.

[1115]

I just want to say one other thing, hon. Speaker. Probably the people who own the helicopters, the water bombers and the like are all wonderful people. I think we need those people, and they should keep on working. But it's also worth a great deal of money.

When I was Parliamentary Secretary for Forests here once upon a time and my kid was flying water bombers, some lobbyists came here. They said, "We know" — and I have no idea how they know this; I guess they research our lives — "what your kid does for a living. We've got some nice new water bombers for sale, and maybe if you bought one.... If you arrange for the province to buy one, we could arrange for your kid to move back to B.C. and work here," meaning they'll employ him.

When that happened to me, I realized there are forces at work here who have big, big profit to make by moving us from human beings with pulaskis to a technology-based, very expensive air war way to fight forest fires. Some of those people, or the lobbyists they hire, might be people of questionable morality.

I would like it if the Ministry of Forests, before anybody ever comes back here and asks for another lift on top of their budget for fighting forest fires, would rethink this whole technological addiction and see if we could put the Forest Service and the forest rangers and the loggers back in the woods to fight forest fires.

**H. Lali:** I rise to take my place to speak on Bill 4, which is called the Ministerial Accountability Bases Act. It's a nice fancy name for this bill. When you look at it, you sort of wonder: what does it really mean?

Perhaps it should be more appropriately termed the "Cover your bases" act. Put in simpler terms, perhaps for the Liberal cabinet, it should be more like "Covering your butts" act, as one of my colleagues has said earlier. It really isn't, at the end of the day, about ministerial accountability or any kind of bases.

It's really about protecting a number of ministers, because there are fines that are associated or holdbacks of ministerial salaries. If the ministry's budget goes over the amount that was passed in the Legislature during budget debates, usually in the spring, then that particular minister could be fined if the budget and expenses go over what has actually been allotted to them.

What you find is nice little loopholes that this government has put in place for ministers to do exactly what they're not supposed to do, which is actually run over budget and have more costs than the income that has come in. I mean, that's what happens. It hasn't happened just once. You've seen ministers across the way and even Liberal backbenchers talking about how they're so fiscally prudent and how they're the greatest managers.

But this type of Ministerial Accountability Bases Act, covering themselves, hasn't just happened once. They haven't just come back the following spring on one occasion; they've come back on five occasions. This is

the fifth year in a row that this Liberal government has come back to this House after passing a budget with full debate from both sides in one spring and then come back before the end of the fiscal year, March 31, into this House and turned around and said: "Oops, we made a mistake. We ended up spending more money than we said we were going to do."

Not just once or twice or three times — five times they've done that. They've come back here saying that they've overspent. What they're trying to say is that they're trying to protect ministries.

[1120]

The ministries whose estimates were passed in the springtime last year.... These include Advanced Education; Environment; Finance; Health; Tourism, Sport and the Arts; Forests and Range; and Public Safety and Solicitor General — seven ministries. Why is that? Because in each one of those years....

You know, the Finance Minister and the Premier and the cabinet ministers get up here, and they paint this huge rosy picture of finances and income coming in for the province of British Columbia. They do that every year. They did it last year as well — how things were going to be great.

They didn't listen to anyone out in the real world, who were saying that they'd better be prudent because there's a bit of a crash coming in the financial departments of the world. They didn't listen. They didn't prepare for that. They didn't listen to the opposition. They didn't listen to all the folks who said that they're going to be in trouble.

So what do they do? They come back here, and they bring in this "Covering the ministers' jobs" act, basically. That's what it should be most appropriately termed. It is so that ministers whose ministries have run over budget, have expended more than they've taken in, don't lose up to — what? — 20 percent of their salary. That's what it's all about. It's about protecting their own paycheque. It's about protecting them. That's what this is all about.

A number of my colleagues have talked about how the Liberals like to pass themselves off as some sort of great financial managers. But when you look at their picture in terms of what they've done, they've had three deficits, in 2002, 2003 and 2004.

You know, when they took office in 2001, they inherited the largest surplus, at \$1.48 billion. That's what they did. They inherited the largest surplus in the history of British Columbia up to that time. That's what they did. But they turned around, and they actually unbalanced the balanced budget that was put forward by an outgoing NDP government.

They turned around and said: "Oh, it's not balanced. It's not a surplus. There is a structural deficit." A structural deficit. You'll hear every one of them. They'll never ever come out publicly and say: "There was a deficit." They like to come out and say: "There was a structural deficit." Yet, nobody out in British Columbia knows what that is

supposed to mean. I don't even think they know what that means.

The fact of the matter is that if they hadn't given away huge corporate tax breaks to those large corporations, most of them with their headquarters outside of Canada, outside of British Columbia, there would be no such thing. They created it, something to just pass off so they could actually take the heat off the great corporate giveaways that they had done.

You know what the result was? For three years in a row they ran deficits — not just any old deficits, or small deficits, but fairly significant, fairly large deficits. This is not from an NDP document. It's from an independent Office of the Auditor General report of November 2004, the financial framework from '97 to 2004. It's put forward by the Auditor General under their watch — not an NDP watch, their watch.

According to the Auditor General's report, it says in 2002 it was over a billion dollar deficit. But in 2003, it was over \$3 billion. That's what that deficit was. It was the largest deficit in the history of this province. In the next year, 2004, it was again over a billion dollars. That's their deficit. They don't want to talk about that. That's three deficits.

Then they had, during the economic turnaround in North America, which took place right across Canada.... British Columbia also reaped the benefits of that North American economic turnaround, and they had four balanced budgets. That's what they did.

So you had three that were deficits and four that were balanced by this government. Then, of course, now they've put forward that they're going to have two more deficits. The '09-10 budget, which is in the House here, and also the 2010-11 budget. They've said that they're also going to be deficits. So that makes it five. That makes five deficits out of nine years.

[1125]

But if the current year's budget, ending March 31, coming up, comes in as a deficit, which it may very likely be with the way things are, then that's going to make it six out of nine — six deficits out of nine by this government that likes to put themselves forward as somehow the champions of financial management.

It's right here. It's in the Auditor General's comments in a report for the Liberal government presented at the end of November 2004, not by any NDP government. If folks like, I can table this document that they can look at for themselves. They don't have to believe me. They can look it up in the report itself. I'll even give them the website.

They like to pass it off as if they're trying to protect ministries. I'm not saying there aren't some legitimate costs that have taken place that shouldn't be looked after, but what I am saying is that they do this in a springtime when they bring in the budget and say: "Oh, great things are going to happen." But sure enough, 11 months and — what is it? — 29 days later, they're back in the House,

practically the last day before March 31, before it has to be passed, and they turn around and say: "Oops, we made a mistake."

That's five years in a row. You can excuse them if it happened sporadically — one year, maybe it happened a few years later — but five years in a row? When that happens, you can tell there's this pattern that is forming.

Cover yourself. That's what it's all about. Cover your ministers. They want to say that it protects ministries, but what it's all about is protecting ministers so they don't lose their pay from their pockets. That's what it's about. It all boils down to protecting themselves and their own paycheque.

But I'll tell you who's not protected by this bill or even the budget we saw that was before the House. I'll tell you, hon. Speaker, who's not protected. Poor people in British Columbia — they're not protected. Poverty levels in British Columbia are at their highest level for folks under the poverty line.

It doesn't protect children who live in poverty. You know, for the fifth year in a row under this Liberal government we have had the highest rates of child poverty.

It doesn't protect aboriginal people, the most impoverished people not just in Canada but right here in British Columbia, where we have over 200 individual first nations bands. If you look at it in terms of their health care, their education, their access to economic and educational opportunities, their rates of health — diabetes, teenage pregnancies, the epidemic of AIDS on reserves — the lack of jobs.... If you look at every single indicator, it's the highest in the country on aboriginal reserves. This does not protect aboriginal people.

And it doesn't protect rural British Columbia either. We have seen the most massive job losses ever in the history of British Columbia take place under the watch of this government. This does not protect rural British Columbia and the forest industry. We've had, under this Liberal government, 65 sawmills and pulp mills that have been closed. That's 33,000 permanent jobs lost in the forest industry — well-paying, family-supporting jobs.

This does not take into account all of the small business operators, the remaners, that are there in the value-added facilities all throughout British Columbia and the additional jobs that are lost. This takes into account the larger sawmills that hit the radar screen. A lot of those little outfits don't — those ma-and-pa-type outfits, those local outfits that have put value into our forest industry.

This does not protect seniors health either. This government promised 5,000 long-term care beds. But before they even started to put any shovels in the ground and build even a single long-term care bed in British Columbia, they closed 2,800 long-term care beds all across the province. That's what they did.

What you needed was nearly 8,000 beds. Despite all of their promises that they've made.... They made so many promises. I think the 5,000 long-term care beds were

announced in budget after budget after budget for about five years in a row. To this point, we've only got about 2,000 that are on the ground right now. So that still leaves a deficit of 6,000, according to their own count.

[1130]

What does that do for seniors? It doesn't protect them.

If you look across the Interior Health, the largest cuts to health care in this province that have taken place under this Liberal watch were in the Interior Health region — the Thompson, the Nicola, the Okanagan, south Cariboo, the Kootenays.

Interjection.

**H. Lali:** That's where the massive cuts took place, even in that member's own hometown of Penticton. That's where those cuts took place.

They did it when they gave away over a billion dollars in corporate tax base per year, and that's increased every year since then. They made it on the promise where they said: "Oh, the budget is unbalanced now. We've got a structural deficit. When the good times are here, we'll give it back."

They never did. During the four good years not a single penny was actually put back, not under this Liberal government. They're still waiting, the folks in the Interior.

When you look at that, you're looking at rural hospitals. I'll talk about my own constituency. In Ashcroft, which will be in my new constituency of Fraser-Nicola, during the busiest time of the year, during the worst weather conditions the hospital was closed. There were no doctors. They won't get doctors out there. Princeton has gone the same thing. The OR room has been closed over there now. The emergency room has had closures. At Lytton hospital it's the same thing. Merritt, which had 24 beds, has only eight beds under this government. It closed 16. It's a subregional hospital.

On the Coquihalla Highway system there are six major highways that intersect there. During the winter especially and during the busy weekends, accidents take place. You look at the Royal Inland Hospital, which gets about 40,000 emergency room visits. There are 150,000 people in the region; that's what it services.

But Merritt alone — a small community of 8,000 people — has had more than one-third the number of visits that Royal Inland does, about 14,000 ER visits per year and only eight beds. That's what this government has done.

Lillooet is the same thing. They cut beds everywhere. In Hope they cut acute care beds, and Lillooet, Merritt, Princeton, Ashcroft, Keremeos — every one of those communities under this Liberal government. So this bill does not protect my communities in my riding.

I'm mindful of the time, and I know there perhaps are other speakers that will be speaking after me, but I

also want to speak about one issue in particular. There are a lot of issues, but due to time I'm not able to touch on all of them. It's about agriculture and ranching in particular.

Agriculture under this government has had, over the last eight years, cuts almost every year in terms of the money that goes into the ministry for agricultural programs. This year it's no different in this budget. There are huge cuts. In each one of those categories is a 7 percent cut that's coming down.

It doesn't help ranchers. We have ranching — some in the Princeton area, especially in the Merritt area, in the Nicola Valley. You go northward from there all the way through the south Cariboo region, the constituencies of my friends the members for south Cariboo and north Cariboo, up into the Peace River country around Prince George, and it's ranching country galore.

What has happened is that it's at the lowest level of funding for agriculture, and it's taking place under this government — lower than any other province in the country. Here we're supposed to have some of the prime beef-producing country in the world, but it's not getting the support from this government.

I want to talk about ranching. I've got ranchers. I know that my colleagues on this side of the House and my colleagues from the other side of the House who are from rural B.C. are also getting ranchers coming in, pleading for help.

Ranchers are very proud. They never ask for government help. When you look at it during the tough times, they weather it out. They like to help each other. They don't like to complain. But for the last four years — especially the last four years — they've been hurting, and they've been coming to government, not asking for a bailout or a handout. They're asking for legitimate assistance to help them become the great producers that they historically have been, and this government has turned them away time and time again.

[1135]

It's not fair. It's not fair that when you have folks in rural British Columbia — whether it's mining or forestry or agriculture or tourism and all of the other dirt ministries, as we call it — generating the wealth for this province to pay for health and education, to pay for universities and the large hospitals in urban British Columbia, this urban-dominated government won't look at the legitimate issues of concerns of the people in rural British Columbia, especially folks in the ranching community.

I've got a letter here from a rancher. I'm going to quote from this letter. It's a letter to the Minister of Agriculture from Matt Williams. He's a ranch manager in the Nicola Valley. He's referring to the Liberal government. "Your government and ministry needs to be held accountable for its lack of interest in and insensitivity for the ranching community during the past four years of the BSE market crisis." That's what he's talking about.

Yet ranchers, as you know, do not traditionally or, in most cases that I know, ever support my party. They've always backed the party of the Social Credit. We have one Social Credit member still here — the old Social Credit — in this House. Or they back conservative parties federally or this Liberal Party here, provincially, now. They don't back my party, but this is coming from a rancher in the Nicola Valley.

He continues on. Of course, the ranchers don't like the ALR. That's no secret. It doesn't matter if it's Social Credit, NDP or Liberal government in place, they just don't like the ALR. In reference to that, he's saying:

"While B.C. cattle producers continue to face long-term financial hardship, your government" — and he's talking about the Liberal government — "continues to champion an old mantra, to put in place policies that call into question the security of our grazing and water tenures, to fail to replace old, worn-out highway and range fences, to off-load the entire liability with respect to highway rights-of-way onto cattle producers, to prescribe punitive slaughterhouse regulations while at the same time advocating the hundred-mile diet."

That's what he says. All of these issues that not only the Nicola stockbreeders but the B.C. Cattlemen's Association and all the other associations in every region have.... They've been talking to the government, to the bureaucracy. They've been talking to the various Agriculture ministers this government has put in place, and they've been asking for help.

What Mr. Williams is telling me and the government — actually, this is a letter to the minister — is that they're getting no help, especially on BSE, and to put the slaughterhouse regulations in place and not even stand up to the federal Conservatives....

Then he continues. He says:

"Your government" — that would be the Liberal government — "has almost completely eliminated the extension service of the Ministry of Agriculture, failed to control noxious weeds, cut back agricultural spending to the lowest level per capita in Canada and imposed an unfair carbon tax. Our ranchlands must be considered part of the solution, but instead they are held under a protective covenant without compensation and then taxed for the privilege."

"Finally, your government continues to cling to the AgriStability model, a program that does not deliver.

"What has your government done that could possibly be seen as positive, with fair treatment to ranchers?"

This is coming from one rancher, and I've got lots of other letters. So do my colleagues from Cariboo North and Cariboo South and other members, who are getting all sorts of letters from ranchers saying that this Liberal government has abandoned them.

They want to know from this Liberal government: if the Premier and the Liberal cabinet want to have a viable ranching industry and viable agriculture in this province, when are they going to put some supports in there to help ranchers thrive, as opposed to actually driving them out of business?

That's what's happening, whether it's all these items that I've talked about or the meat industry regulation that this government did not have the fortitude to actually stand

up to Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper — they didn't do that — or the imposition of this punitive carbon tax.

What's happened is that ranchers are price takers. They don't pass the price on. They can't pass the price on, because the price of their product is dictated by the international markets. They can't go out there and say, "This is the price we're going to charge," and pass the price on to you. They keep taking on price after price after price.

[1140]

This government has completely abandoned the ranching community of this province and fails to stand up for them and represent them to help them out.

It's the first time I know of — and I've been in Canada for 43 years — that I've seen ranchers actually asking the government to help and assist. They're proud people. They're self-sufficient. They turn to each other. Neighbour helps a neighbour when they're in need. They've done that for generations and generations. That's how self-sufficient and proud they are.

But for the first time they're saying to their government, to the Liberal government in this province: "We need a little bit of assistance, because we pay taxes. We pay taxes on our land; we pay taxes on our products. We pay our employees well. Our employees pay taxes, income taxes. Our employees and our ranchers all across the province — we pay the consumptive taxes as well. And what are we getting in return for our efforts? Nothing. Nothing from this Liberal government."

Hon. Speaker, you've got here this Bill 4 entitled Ministerial Accountability Bases Act, which the ministers across the way are saying is there to protect these seven ministries. The reality is that they're protecting themselves. They're protecting their paycheques. But the people who need help the most, all of these people I talked about — poor people, the homeless, aboriginal people, rural British Columbians, forestry workers, seniors, people who need help in agriculture and ranching.... None of those are being helped by this Liberal government.

This bill does absolutely nothing to help any of those people, these disadvantaged people who need help, but it does help the ministers — seven ministers, to be exact. It saves them 20 percent of their ministerial salary. That's what this bill is about. These Liberal cabinet ministers and the backbenchers should be ashamed of putting this forward without helping the people who need it the most.

**G. Coons:** It's a great honour to rise to talk about Bill 4, Ministerial Accountability Bases Act, 2008-2009. I recognize that there are some people in the precinct and people perhaps just turning on their TVs at home or those shut-in CAs that are watching and may not have been paying attention.

This bill basically protects ministerial bonuses by retroactively changing the estimates for the last year so that budgets are met. It's retroactively changing legislation,

and it's designed to meet the conditions of the Balanced Budget and Ministerial Accountability Act — which in the summer of 2001 was this government's and this Premier's tough, tough budget and ministerial accountability legislation that would hold ministers accountable fiscally. Here we have this loophole that these ministers and this government continually have gone through over the last four or five years.

Basically, we have estimates that are revised according to an extensive government reorganization of ministry responsibilities, and the supplementary estimates are added to that. As I mentioned, for the last four, five or six years the government retroactively changed the estimates in order to protect the ministers' bonuses.

That's what we're looking at right here, hon. Chair and those out there paying attention. We look at Bill 4. We look at the ministries that are not going to be held accountable, and again, there may be some good reason. There may be some fiscal responsibility in some of those ministries that we may have to follow through with such an act as this, but we look at some of the other ones.

We've got the Ministry of Advanced Education and Labour Market Development, Ministry of Community Development, Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Forests and Range, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Housing and Social Development, Ministry of Labour, Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General, Ministry of Tourism, Ministry of Transportation and Infrastructure. We look at these ministries that are coming under this loophole bill so that ministers are not held fiscally responsible, and then we just sort of see the broken promises of this government.

[1145]

Last year it was seven ministries that the legislation came in to protect. These ones were Advanced Ed; Environment; Finance; Health; Tourism, Sport and the Arts; Forests and Range; Public Safety and Solicitor General.

This is the fifth year in a row that such a bill has come to the floor. It was necessary for this government to not hold their ministers accountable. Similar bills, loophole bills, were brought forth in 2005, 2006, 2007 and 2008. Basically, to get it right in 2004, they had to bring it forward three times just to ensure.... Three times. No three strikes and you're out, for these guys. Three times they had to bring it forward so that they got it right, so that the ministers would not lose financially on their scam to protect accountability.

What we've got are the ministers having this opportunity to be off the hook from being accountable on the fiscal side of things. Let's look at the years when they brought in this tough budget with puffed-up chests, saying: "We're going to be the most open and accountable government that you've ever seen." What did we see? We saw, oh, open cabinet meetings. And where have they shuffled off to?

**An Hon. Member:** They're gone.

**G. Coons:** They're gone, as the member says.

So what do we have here? How many ministers have been held accountable? How many have lost their ministerial bonus because of fiscal instability on the part of the minister? None, because every year for the last five years they've brought in bills such as this. They saw it necessary to protect their ministers.

I look back to a member from this side who, back when the legislation was being enacted, said: "Here's this government off the hook through their own banana republic style of ramming through legislation." That's what we've got on that side. We've got members who are so out of touch, so arrogant, how can British Columbians trust them?

That's the difference between this side of the House and that side of the House. That side of the House abandons their moral ethics when they come into the chamber, and they do whatever they want. They drink the Kool-Aid of the Premier.

As we move along and look at where we're going with this bill and examine the financial penalties.... This government brought in this legislation with great fanfare, great pride, and here we are — the fifth year in a row sneaking through their legislation so that their ministers don't have to be held accountable. It seems that the saying on that side of the House is that when the going gets tough, this government changes the law.

[Mr. Speaker in the chair.]

When we look back at some of the quotes of the Premier back when he was the Leader of the Opposition and he voted in 2000 against the NDP's balanced-budget legislation, he said.... This is a quote from the ex-Leader of the Opposition who is now Premier. He says: "It's amazing how rewriting laws can work for a government that doesn't really care about the law." That's the Premier that we've got.

A couple of other quotes that I found about the Premier discussing how laws work: "We can disagree on the laws that are passed, and we often do, but the foundation of our society is that once a law is passed, we agree to obey it. We do not get to obey the laws that we like and disobey the laws that we don't like."

An interesting concept. But in this House, what does this government do? They have laws they don't like. So what do they do? They change the laws.

**An Hon. Member:** Retroactively.

[1150]

**G. Coons:** Retroactively, may I add. So when we look at what is happening with this bill before us, Bill 4, the Ministerial Accountability Bases Act — which is a real oxymoron because this bill basically just destroys accountability.... It destroys scrutiny and basically just shows how arrogant this government is.

When we look at where we're going with this.... We saw the holdback of ministerial bonuses as sort of up on the pedestal where people could strive to. We're going to be fiscally responsible. We're going to ensure that British Columbians know how our money is spent. We're going to ensure that our ministers are accountable.

Back in the days when the times were good.... When we go back to those days, this side of the House, the NDP, left them with a \$1.4 billion surplus — the largest in B.C. history to that point. What did they do? They squandered it all.

They cut; they slashed. They attacked the most vulnerable in our society, whether it's seniors, students or the most disadvantaged — first nations. They strived to be number one, and we are number one in child poverty. For five years in a row, this province has been number one in child poverty. The gap between the rich and the poor has increased exponentially.

When we have such a bill before us, we can see this as part of this government's hidden agenda of lack of accountability, no scrutiny. They cut budgets to FOI. They cut budgets to the Auditor General, so people cannot try to go in and see what they're really doing with their privatization of British Columbia.

As we move along and start looking at this loophole act before us and look back at the last five years, as I've mentioned.... It's become an annual ritual for this government of revising the law — revising it to meet their needs to the detriment of being accountable.

When we look at this annual ritual, it just excuses cabinet ministers from any financial penalties for not meeting their budgets. This government came in 2001 and said: "There will be a price to pay for ministers that are not fiscally responsible, who do not meet the needs of British Columbians and do not follow their budgets." Again, here we stand, for the fifth year in a row, looking

at a bill exempting the Premier's friends at the top level of cabinet from taking any financial hits for their fiscal irresponsibility.

When we look at where we need to go with this act before us, I believe that this government continues to try to pull the wool over the eyes of British Columbians. In previous years, yes, when this came before us on this side, we may have looked at the situation, whether it's the fires that were happening or it was some situations that happened throughout the province that we may have had to use this accountability bases act to a degree to hold ministers accountable and look at the situation.

But this before us today flagrantly shows the agenda of this government. As we move forward, British Columbians, in the weeks to come, will see through this veil of secrecy that they've pulled over this province for the last eight years and see that the attack on the most vulnerable, the sell-off of our province, and the lack of accountability and scrutiny are rampant on that side of the House.

Noting the time and noting the hour, I move adjournment of debate and reserve my place to speak.

G. Coons moved adjournment of debate.

Motion approved.

Hon. I. Chong moved adjournment of the House.

Motion approved.

**Mr. Speaker:** This House stands adjourned until 1:30 p.m. this afternoon.

The House adjourned at 11:55 a.m.

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