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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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TUESDAY, MARCH 24, 2009

The House met at 10:03 a.m.

[Mr. Speaker in the chair.]

Prayers.

Orders of the Day

Hon. T. Christensen: I call continued debate on the budget.

Budget Debate (continued)

J. Horgan: When we adjourned debate last night, I was remarking to all those assembled and those at home about the challenges we have as legislators now and into the future.

Constituents in my community say the economy is at the top of their list of concerns, as it should be. We've had unparalleled downturn in financial markets. We've had the credit crisis that's leading to uncertainty at home. I know my friend from West Vancouver will speak about that, if he hasn't already — the importance of all of us working together cooperatively across the aisle in an Obama-esque fashion.

My friend from Kingsway was reminding me just this morning, hon. Speaker, as you would imagine, that those on the government side believe they have a monopoly on good sense, and they assume that those of us on this side of the House have nothing to contribute to their point of view and their perspective. I say that that's categorically false because all of us in this place have an obligation and a responsibility to meet the needs of our constituents. That's what I've been trying to do over the past four years in this place.

You weren't here, hon. Speaker. I know you were off on business. I was lamenting the end of the constituency of Malahat–Juan de Fuca. With the redistribution that's coming forward, no longer will the Malahatians be joined with the Juan de Fucans, and we'll have two separate constituencies. It's my view and the view of the member for Prince George North that...

[1005]

Interjection.

J. Horgan: As the last sitting member for Malahat–Juan de Fuca, I want to conclude my budget remarks today by thanking all of the members for their attention to my comments and, I would believe, support for my point of view that there needs to be more capital spending in my constituency, whether it be Highway 14, whether it be improvements to the Malahat, whether it be light rapid

transit or commuter rail or, more importantly, solving the problem of our high school. We have one high school in the city of Langford.

I've certainly had a lovely time this morning with the end of my budget debate.

Hon. J. van Dongen: I rise today to take my turn among my government colleagues to assert my support for this budget. Make no mistake. This is a tough, disciplined budget, delivered during a most uncertain and difficult time in our province.

[K. Whittred in the chair.]

As global economic shifts take place throughout the world, we are not immune to the impact that these play on our provincial economy, and it is in times such as these that we need a budget that protects our important social services and works to promote confidence amongst our citizens and through global investment markets.

While this economic storm blows through, we will endure, and we will become stronger each day as a province, as an economy and as communities. I know the people of my community, Abbotsford, are very much alive to the realities of these economic shifts. In Abbotsford we see primarily the housing market decline, and we see that Budget 2009 offers my constituents confidence during these more difficult economic times so that they may continue to enjoy a standard of living in a healthy, vibrant community.

I want to highlight the key elements in our budget. The temporary deficit outlined in Budget 2009 will total \$495 million in 2009-2010 and \$245 million in 2010-11. These deficits stack up very well compared to the historically strong economies of Alberta and Ontario, to give two examples. Our government has chosen to follow a prudent approach, an approach of responsible fiscal management and careful stewardship of the provincial economy to ensure that we have the flexibility to be able to continue to support important and vital social services.

This economy will create thousands of jobs. We are investing \$14 billion in infrastructure projects that will build and renovate schools, that will add to our post-secondary institutions, that will build many new health care facilities in our province, build new transportation projects to continue to foster the kind of infrastructure we need for our economy and will create up to 88,000 new jobs in all parts of British Columbia.

This budget will continue to invest in our communities to support vulnerable children and families, will continue to provide \$300 million in additional vital social services in our communities. I'm particularly proud of the \$54 million increase in Community Living B.C.

This budget will increase funding for health and education. Funding for the Ministry of Health will increase by \$4.8 billion over the next three years. Hon. Speaker, \$4.8 billion over the next three years is the size of the budget when I was first elected 13 years ago. The health care budget was around \$5 billion. Now that is the increase in this budget over the next three years. We will invest an additional \$228 million in post-secondary institutions, and we will increase per-pupil funding in K-to-12 to record levels.

We will deliver the lowest provincial income taxes in Canada. In fact, we have made numerous reductions in personal, business and corporate taxes over the last seven years, or almost eight years, so that individuals earning up to \$116,000 per year will pay less income tax than any other jurisdiction in Canada.

[1010]

We will continue to maintain our advantage as a competitive, welcoming economy for business. I am particularly proud of the fact that under the stewardship of our government over the last eight years, British Columbia has achieved a triple-A credit rating. That is very, very important to ensure that we absolutely minimize our cost of borrowing to invest in the very important infrastructure projects that are part of this budget. No other province in Canada has a higher credit rating than British Columbia.

I want to make a few comments about my community, the community of Abbotsford, the fifth-largest city in British Columbia, also the largest provider of agriculture and food products in British Columbia by farm-gate sales. We are the centre of agriculture, the centre of agribusiness for this province, and proudly so. We see, throughout this difficult economic time, the stability and the ongoing economic contribution that agriculture provides.

We have a thriving aerospace industry, both a repair and maintenance facility that is second to none, competing with people all over the world, and an aerospace parts supply industry that is there to service that sector.

We have a thriving construction industry that has built record numbers of both residential and commercial buildings in our community over the last eight years.

We have a new regional hospital and cancer centre that our government invested in — after many years of neglect. Our government built that facility. It is technologically the most progressive facility in North America. It is the first time in Canada that a new cancer centre was built as part of a new hospital. We're very proud of having built that facility, as a government.

We have a new university in our community, which has incredible community support. It has fostered very, very active, direct connections with the community to ensure that the programming is relevant, that we foster trades training. That is a regional university that takes in all of the communities of our region. It is doing a great job of producing graduates with education that is relevant to our needs today.

We have a strong and diverse economy in Abbotsford. We also have personal characteristics in our community that I'm proud of: a high savings rate, people who are prepared to invest in the future. We have a high level of giving to charities in our community.

Also, thanks to investment by both the provincial government and our community, we have a whole system of new trails, almost \$3 million of investment in the last four years. We have new recreation facilities, a new museum, a new facility for seniors and a new sports facility, which will diversify the recreational and entertainment opportunities in our community.

I want to take the rest of my time, hon. Speaker, to talk about my ministry responsibilities, which are a very, very important part of this budget. This budget provides confidence to the public that our government is very much aware of the concerns that they have about community and personal safety. No one should have to fear for their personal safety from outlaws and gangsters who think that the streets belong to them. Certainly, we have people that are directly affected by this very serious phenomenon in our communities today.

No one living in a quiet suburban neighbourhood should have the apprehension of risk, of becoming the innocent bystander of a drive-by shooting. No one should drive with trepidation that their car may be confused with a targeted gangster's vehicle. No one should suffer the consequences of reckless and reprehensible violence that Ed Schellenberg and Chris Mohan did. Ed Schellenberg is from my community.

With this budget our government will do more to build upon the work that we have done since 2001 to enhance policing. Our government's intention is very clear: more police, more prosecutors, more jails and tougher laws, and Budget 2009 enables us to do that.

This budget will enable the RCMP and independent forces to hire 168 new police officers that will focus solely on gangs. This single measure alone nearly doubles the existing force in place. This will also mean a 16-member satellite unit in Prince George and another 16-member satellite unit in Kelowna, because we know that gang and gun violence moves across community lines.

[1015]

On top of that, we are creating a ten-member weapons enforcement unit aimed at getting illegal guns off our streets. This builds on the 950 officers hired since 2001, the \$210 million of ticket fine revenue returned to municipalities — something that was never done by the previous government — new money to municipalities for community safety and \$66 million provided to ten major integrated teams including the Combined Forces Special Enforcement Unit.

These are not just regional units. They're provincial units. They represent the most progressive integration of police forces that we have seen anywhere in Canada.

In fact, I had the opportunity last summer to visit the CFSEU headquarters to see the work that they do and meet the people who dedicate their lives to the eradication of gangs from our province. I would like to take this opportunity to publicly thank them for the work that they do and let them know the support that they have from myself and our government. The new investments we recently announced will build upon the hard work they already do to investigate and build very difficult cases against organized crime.

However, it doesn't stop with enforcement. Once police have the case against these criminals, we need to have the means to effectively prosecute and incarcerate. As such, we will be hiring ten new prosecutors to prosecute gangs, all with a direction to seek maximum sentences on gun crimes, and we have 16 prosecutors that will work directly with police officers to assist them in development of charges.

What this all means is that we'll have 26 prosecutors now dedicated to putting gangsters in jail on top of the 49 prosecutors already working on gang files. The corrections branch in my ministry has been working to build more capacity within our jail and pretrial system to ensure offenders are held behind bars. As such, I am pleased that Budget 2009 enables \$185 million of new money to go towards the construction of new, modern, secure correctional facilities all over British Columbia with the ability to house over 600 additional offenders.

As a side note, it is very disappointing to see the approach taken by the opposition on this plan. In fact, the MLA for Burnaby-Edmonds has been working diligently to discredit the work of our corrections facilities and our corrections staff, working to spread apprehension and fear amongst the community and has been leveraging the normal concerns of the community for political gain and that of the NDP party. I consider it irresponsible, but unfortunately, this member doesn't appear to be capable of rising above pure partisan politics and working to seriously address the issues that confront our communities today.

Our Premier put out the call to all community leaders, including the MLA for Burnaby-Edmonds, seeking support for our gangs and guns strategy, seeking his support for the Willingdon pretrial centre. Instead of trying to do something that would make a difference for the betterment of public safety in his community, this MLA has chosen to exploit and fan the normal apprehensions of his constituents.

But there is much more to be done. The best way to utilize the resources this government has created is to stop gang violence and to get tough within our criminal justice system. We do need tougher federal laws that will make it harder to get bail and will eliminate two-for-one credits for time served. We need to expand the abilities of police to obtain wiretaps and simplify evidence disclosure requirements. We're dealing, in some cases, with legislation within the Criminal Code that was written in

1974. We might as well be tying the hands of the police behind their back with legislation like this. I call on all federal political parties to work to change that legislation.

These are issues that are very deeply rooted, systemic issues that are hampering all of the players in our justice system, and they need to be changed. They need to be fixed. The Criminal Code needs to be modernized in this respect. I was very pleased to have the opportunity to meet with federal Public Safety Minister Peter Van Loan a few weeks ago and also with his colleague, the hon. Rob Nicholson to discuss these very important issues with them.

[1020]

The Attorney General and myself had the opportunity to visit with all political parties in Ottawa, and I believe that we were well received. They understand our concerns and I encouraged them to work together very ardently to deal with these issues.

We intend to continue the dialogue with them until the day that we see the toughening of our criminal justice system, particularly on the three really critical systemic issues that we have raised. We will continue to go to Ottawa as often as needed to see these measures changed, to ensure things such as the reintroduction of Bills C-25 and C-26 that will detain violent youth and bring in mandatory minimum sentences for serious drug convictions. We will want to see them remain on the legislative agenda.

There is so much more that we can do to combat gangs, but we do seriously need the support of Ottawa and all parties in Ottawa to make that happen.

We will be coming down hard on illegal gun users with a new ten-member weapons enforcement unit to seize illegal firearms. They will be integrated with the integrated police teams that I referred to earlier. It is important to me that legal firearm owners and users know that the government has no plans, intentions or otherwise to limit, restrict or in any way hinder their legal use of a firearm. Rather, together with legal owners, we need to go after the illegal movement, the illegal use and the illegal acquisition of these firearms by organized crime.

We'll do that by taking over responsibility for the federal firearms program and bringing the direction of that program back to B.C. Then we can develop and implement the tougher standards and security requirements for gun dealers that both government and stakeholders agree we need to bring about public safety.

Further, as we speak, prosecutors are now pursuing jail time for people convicted of illegal weapons possession and violent offences. We intend to outlaw modified armoured vehicles and provide more powers to police to confiscate and destroy them. Vehicles carrying illegal weapons will also be confiscated, and we will continue to use the Civil Forfeiture Act and forensic accountants to seize and sell vehicles obtained through unlawful activity.

There is no doubt that there are some legitimate users of body armour. However, often police are encountering more and more gang members who use body armour as a means to act recklessly on our streets with an ongoing sense of immortality. A new licensing regime will be implemented for the sale and purchase of body armour, including criminal-record checks.

It will take new approaches and innovation to successfully combat organized crime and gun violence. One of the ideas that we will be pursuing with stakeholders is a new escalating rewards program for those who provide valuable anonymous tips over a phone hotline.

We continue to encourage people to use the Crime Stoppers line to inform police. It is a way that they can do it anonymously. We know that there is significant intimidation of potential witnesses, but we do encourage family members to work with the police if they believe that friends or family are involved in organized crime. It will be a favour to their loved one if they do that.

We will continue our work to prevent new gang recruits with \$1 million being put towards youth education programs which deter youth from joining gangs, for a total program funding of \$3 million since 2006. The Attorney General and I met this morning with the community of Lillooet, the leadership in that community and the neighbouring first nations band, and I want to cite them as an example of a community that is working together proactively to try and deal with the problem of recruitment both in first nations and in non-first nations communities. We will continue to work with them on these programs.

Communities, such as the community of Abbotsford, are concerned about the violence they hear each night on the news. But I hope that our communities know that I, personally, as Solicitor General of this province, and our government will do everything within our powers to bring the agents of fear and chaos, those who choose to challenge the safety and security of our communities, to ultimate justice.

[1025]

There is not a single day that goes by that I don't think about Chris Mohan and his mother Eileen or Ed Schellenberg and his wife Lois and their families or Kirk Holifield and Jonathan Barber, all of whom died innocently at the hands of a gangster. Every time that I do, I think about the loss to the families and loved ones that they have left behind.

It does make me angry — angry that people such as the ones who took these lives for no reason at all can exist freely and in our communities and continue their lives as if nothing happened. That is not acceptable, and our government will do everything possible to bring that issue to justice. No more gun violence. No more abuse of our justice system. No more innocent lives lost. We will do everything that we can to bring an end to these crimes and see that those who perpetuate them spend the rest of their lives in jail.

I want this House to know that I will be calling on you to support these efforts through legislative means but also more importantly through the support of this budget and the investments that it represents. I want our communities to know that I'm doing all I can to ensure that we do have a strong, effective justice system that we can be proud of and one that is employing all of the possible resources that we can put at its disposal.

This includes our commitment to continue to lobby Ottawa to talk to all of our federal political partners to support these critical systemic initiatives to improve our justice system, to improve our Criminal Code.

These are issues that we didn't start working on yesterday. The tragedy is that the three issues that our government has prioritized are issues that we have been working on at federal-provincial tables for at least five years, and that kind of slow process is no longer acceptable. There is an urgency in our communities. Do we have the tools? Do we have the tools we need to help our justice system, to ensure that it works better?

I want the families of victims to know that their loss is felt by our whole province, and they will never be forgotten. I believe that the police in our province, the RCMP and our 11 municipal police forces, are working together in an unprecedented way with all the other parts of our justice system, with the Crown prosecutors and the judiciary to ensure that our communities are safe for all British Columbians — the way it should be.

I'm pleased to support Budget 2009 for the balanced approach that it takes, for the prudent approach that it takes, for all of the efforts that it makes to foster a strong economy, to create jobs, to provide jobs for people and to support the very important social services in health care, in education, both post-secondary and K-to-12, in the important social services that we value in our families and our communities and in the important public safety investments that we make in our justice system.

I'm very pleased to support this budget, and I thank the members of this House for listening to my speech this morning.

D. Routley: I'm pleased to rise in opposition to Budget 2009. I first would, though, like to thank the constituents of Cowichan Valley and the Ladysmith area. Cowichan-Ladysmith is a constituency that will no longer exist under the new boundaries, and it has been an absolute honour to serve the people of that region.

It's a place that I grew up in, and having attended both Cowichan Secondary and Chemainus Secondary and having lived in Chemainus and Duncan for the bulk of my days on this planet, I can only hope that the people there have the smallest inkling of what an honour it's been to serve them. It is an absolutely stunning opportunity to be able to stand in the House of the provincial Legislature and speak on behalf of the community that you grow up in.

[1030]

I'd also like to thank all the staff of the Legislature: the custodians, the security guards, the dining room staff, the pages, the staff in the chamber, the Clerks, also the legislative assistants and, of course, the constituency assistants who help us in our home constituencies. They have been an unbelievable resource to all of us. As we speak to the last budget of this term, we're all reminded of the importance that they've played.

We'd also — all of us — be remiss if we didn't thank our families deeply for the sacrifices they make on our behalf.

Budget 2009 continues the B.C. Liberal tradition of promises, promises, promises — broken, broken, broken. Yet last night we heard the member for Chilliwack-Sumas talk about socialism. Unfortunately, the B.C. Liberals are trapped in the '50s. They're trapped in the past. This old, worn paradigm is no longer relevant. It's no longer relevant to the lives of British Columbians, so negatively impacted by B.C. Liberal policies that have been so idealistically driven for the past eight years.

The answers of President Bush and Prime Minister Harper and other right-wing conservatives no longer suit any question of today. In fact, I would argue that they never suited any question that our families and our communities were asking and needed answered. The rest of the world is acting to intervene in the crisis that we face while the B.C. Liberals sleep, stuck in this dead paradigm that is failing around us, offering nothing but more of the same.

The B.C. Liberal Party took over this province and took over an audited surplus of \$1.496 billion, a real growth rate in 2000-2001 of 4.6 percent, an accumulated growth rate over that decade of 3.01 percent. They've answered that with four deficit budgets.

This one that we are asked to debate today — a \$495 million deficit. That deficit is clearly larger and will prove to be a bigger deficit, as the real budget, they would hope, would be brought forward if they are re-elected. That would be a real shame, because what would happen then would be an unleashing of the same kind of savage policies that harmed so many British Columbians in the 2001 to 2005 period.

The real gross domestic product of this province is shrinking by 1 percent this year. The cumulative average growth rate over these two terms of B.C. Liberal rule is only 2.44 percent. That compares to 3.01 percent for the decade previous. What we have seen is a growth in debt and an absolute explosion of off-balance-sheet debt accounting.

The public-private partnerships entered into by the government have accounted for, by some estimates, some \$50 billion in extra debt. The sale of B.C. Rail left the province without a valuable asset and left the north without the public interest service that B.C. Rail provided, and it did little to improve our economy. In fact, it has damaged the B.C. economy.

What British Columbians care about now are jobs. They care about their jobs. They care about whether or not their jobs will be protected. If they look at the B.C. Liberal record, particularly in forestry, they see a record of simple spectators who have watched during a housing boom in the United States when lumber prices were at their highest. The B.C. Liberals were spectators while we lost four dozen mills and 20,000 forestry jobs. Now faced with crisis, the industry is already on its back and unable to respond with the flexibility that it has become so famous for, for so many generations before.

This period in time is about the economy, it is about jobs, and it's about the protection of those jobs. It shouldn't be about retractable roofs on B.C. Place Stadium — \$375 million. This side of the House warned the government two years ago that the B.C. Place roof needed replacing. They said: "No, don't worry. Everything's okay. It'll last well after the Olympics. We don't need to do anything about that."

[1035]

But what happened? The roof failed. It deflated. Did the B.C. Liberals respond quickly and put a roof over B.C. Place that would be adequate for the Olympics? No, they've made this elaborate plan for a retractable roof costing this province a third of a billion dollars at a time when homelessness has increased by 375 percent; at a time when poverty rates are growing; at a time when we find ourselves, for the sixth year running, leading this country in child poverty.

Poverty rates generally had declined for 17 straight years until the B.C. Liberals took power and then, starting in '01-'02, began to climb again, to the point where 17 percent of British Columbians now work for a minimum wage that is the lowest in the country, the gap between the rich and the poor growing every day.

You know, legislators in the Maritimes, in Nova Scotia, said that they had raised their minimum wage partly because they didn't want to be last anymore. They didn't want to be last. So how did the Liberals answer this question? They reduced the minimum wage when they came to power, and they've refused to raise it. As costs of living in British Columbia — many of Liberal policy doing, such as MSP premiums and other costs — have skyrocketed, there's been no help from this government.

We were promised 5,000 intermediate and long-term care beds by this government. What we got? We got closed beds. We got a bent promise. No more intermediate and long-term care beds. Now it's assisted living, which is nowhere near intermediate and long-term care beds that were promised.

Interjection.

D. Routley: The member knows that that's the truth.

Beds were closed. Community facilities were closed. Private — not non-profit, as was promised — beds have been opened, at the expense of public facilities. In my constituency Sunridge Place was opened, and Cowichan Lodge was closed, after a promise from two of the ministers of this government not to do exactly that. They promised that Cowichan Lodge, the public beds, would remain open.

At the same time, private providers that already existed in our region have empty beds that VIHA and this government refused to fill with the seniors who are waiting placement in our hospital, because they have a contract to fill Sunridge Place. So now those private operators who were good partners with the community for decades are at risk of bankruptcy. In fact, they're meeting in the next weeks in Cowichan Valley to discuss their plight.

How can they cope with a government that has abandoned even them? This government wouldn't listen. It bullied forward. They were told: "If you move seniors in the haphazard way as was planned at Cowichan Lodge, people will die." Study after study tells us that when seniors are dislodged and their surroundings and their homes disrupted, a percentage die. That's a probability. It's a probability that becomes a certainty once proven. There's no hiding behind unintended consequences once you, as a responsible person, undertake that kind of a risk.

That's what happened. This government, in its haste to fulfil an ideological plan, bullied seniors. The health care "where and when you need it" promise was broken. In Cowichan Hospital, bed shortage, largely because of seniors waiting placement, has resulted in 109 cancelled surgeries last year alone.

There's a local disparity in funding that's mirrored in rural communities all over this province. In the Cowichan Valley there's one bed per thousand residents. In the Victoria and Nanaimo areas, that's two and 2.8 beds per thousand residents. Mental health funding in the rural regions of Vancouver Island is funded 30 percent less than in the urban areas. That leads to real tragedies.

[1040]

A young man came into my office complaining that he couldn't get a bus pass to his mental health treatment. This young man's name is Kevin Edwards. He went to the media because he had attempted suicide and used a gun. He was charged with a gun crime.

Part of his treatment was that he would agree to fulfil a treatment plan in the neighbouring town of Duncan. He couldn't afford a bus pass. No one could provide it to him. It took him going to the media and providing the embarrassment motive to this government for his individual problem to be solved.

But we can't meet the needs of our citizens as long as this government allows these deficits to grow in our communities. They're deficits that are played out in hospital rooms, deficits that are played out in classrooms, deficits that are played out in real people's lives — not just on the balance sheet. Those deficits were growing while this

government waved a flag of surplus for the previous years.

They took a made-in-North-America housing boom and coupled it with a made-in-B.C. poverty boom. Homelessness grows; addictions go untreated.

Once our local medical professionals had control over resources and took away that agenda from the B.C. Liberal government and its representative VIHA, and controlled the hip and knee resources in our town, they reduced the wait-list by six months with the existing resources.

Because of mismanagement of the health care system in the Cowichan Valley region, we have lost three anaesthetists. We lost the recruitment of one orthopedic surgeon and one gastrointestinal specialist. Both of those specialists refused to come to the Cowichan Valley once they saw the rate of cancellations.

One of the anaesthetists from the Cowichan Valley now travels to Edmonton three weeks out of the month to work in a community hospital there, because he can make more money doing that than working all month in the Cowichan District Hospital. That's because of cancellations. That's because of beds that aren't available. That's because this Liberal government forced an agenda on our communities, which cost us our capacity, and they refuse to meet the need.

That's a job loss. It's about job protection. It's about job security, and that's another loss. When it comes to first nations, the Premier, who engaged the Nisga'a lawsuit.... The government that took first nations rights to referendum now pats itself on the back. They promise more treaties and then in this budget cut resources for treaty negotiations. More broken promises.

Housing and services on reserves for the past four or five years have been overwhelmed because of urban social program cuts by this government, which forced urban first nations residents back to reserve where they overloaded federal programs.

In education we've seen 177 schools closed in this province. Several school districts operate on four-day school weeks. The per-student funding story that this government throws.... They say it's the most funding per student ever.

If you have a reduction of 10 percent in the student enrolment in this province and you increase funding by 5 percent, you can still say you've increased the per-student funding. But you can still see a cut.

Downloaded services, downloaded costs of teacher contracts legislated and not funded, GAAP funding.... How is it that we have fewer students and more funding per student, yet school boards are in deficit?

[1045]

In the Cowichan Valley district this year they go to budget \$1 million short of providing the same programs they provided last year. There are 11,000 classrooms in this province not meeting Bill 33 guidelines. Seismic upgrades were another promise that was broken by the government, yet they still brag about per-student

funding. Per-student funding during a period of enrolment is a faulty measure.

Overall, we have seen cuts in education that have disabled our ability to provide services, particularly to special needs students. Districts all around this province have had to cut transportation, have had to cut services to those vulnerable children, and that is a crying shame because it plays out in the future in a loss of productive capacity in this province.

The Select Standing Committee on Education was told by the executive director of Literacy B.C. that a 1 percent increase in the literacy rates of B.C. equals a \$1.5 billion increase in GDP. Several solutions were offered — very specific solutions to that problem. We were told exactly how to target certain groups to upgrade their literacy rates, but nothing was done. Nothing in this budget answers that.

We saw in B.C. 56,100 people receiving EI benefits this past January. That was up 9 percent from December. That's an additional 4,600 British Columbians who were on EI during that period. As compared with the same time the year before, January 2008, there was a 47.7 percent increase in the number of British Columbians receiving EI benefits. That's an additional 18,000 people.

During that time this government said that everything was good, golden decade, we were immune, B.C. would weather the storm. Well, that's not quite the case — is it? — when we see those kinds of numbers.

In Vancouver, residents receiving EI benefits increased by 55 percent over that period. Victoria, even higher: a 59.3 percent increase in the number of people receiving EI benefits over the last year.

The government is deaf to those numbers. The government is deaf to the voices who cry out, who are stuck earning the lowest minimum wage in Canada. The government seems deaf to the fact that we lead this country, for the sixth year running, in child poverty. They also are deaf to the fact that rural B.C., the revenue pump of our province, has been left out, has been abandoned. They're deaf because they're intentionally deaf.

There's no more pretence, even, of this heartlands strategy, the propaganda that we were offered. Forestry has been abandoned by the B.C. Liberal government. Nothing for workers, nothing for infrastructure. Instead, loaded on our forest industry as our pulp mills close is additional cost — carbon tax, increased hydro rates.

For years the pulp industry struggled to get fibre after this government changed its regulations and allowed pulpwood to rot on the forest floor — a 50 percent greater level of waste in our forests on Vancouver Island, a 50 percent greater level of environmental harm as those logs rot and contribute carbon to the atmosphere.

They didn't support our forest industry in its export development. They closed the foreign trade offices. That cost jobs.

The B.C. Liberal government cost this province its manufacturing base. While the rest of the world

struggles to protect their manufacturing base, this government abandons our number one industry — the most green, the most replenishable industry — forestry. And what happens? We lose four dozen mills and over 20,000 jobs. The former Finance Minister admits that the government were just spectators.

[1050]

Harmac. The current Forests Minister points to the mill at Harmac and its employee ownership model as the model for the future. At the same time, the government refuses to underwrite their environmental liability. The same thing that this government did for its friends in Port Alice, the same thing it was forced to do in Mackenzie when the mill failed and the same thing it will be forced to do in Nanaimo if Harmac fails. So rather than do the right thing — act to save those jobs — the government is content to watch that happen.

Then the environmental crusaders come along. The same government that as one of its first acts in power abolished the Environment Ministry — stripped regulations throughout this province that protected our rivers, our forests, our air and our water — now implements a carbon tax that does nothing to support a transition to greater transit, greater renovation of homes and buildings and retrofitting.

At the same time that our Premier paints himself green and poses for pictures with foreign leaders, he lobbies to remove the moratorium on offshore oil and gas. He lobbies to have tankers off our coast and oil on our shores. This is a government that stripped standards and that refuses to enact endangered species legislation. This is a government that says, that promises, and then breaks and does nothing.

What did they offer rural B.C.? They offered us a meat inspection regimen that has forced small producers out of business or underground. They say we need to reduce our carbon footprint, and yet they put local meat producers out of business. They make it easier for land to be removed from the agricultural land reserve. Rather than protect our farmland, rather than preserve our farmland, they make it easier to remove it from the ALR.

They refuse to raise the minimum wage. It's about jobs — 60,000 more British Columbians....

Interjections.

Deputy Speaker: Members.

D. Routley: Madam Speaker, I wonder how much time the Labour Minister spends in his constituency office. If he did spend time in his constituency office....

Interjection.

Deputy Speaker: Member. Caution, please.

D. Routley: If he did spend time in his constituency office, he would see the faces of workers coming through that door who can no longer meet the cost of living — minimum-wage workers. He would see forest workers who are losing their benefits. He represents a government that did one thing for those workers — a five-week extension to EI benefits. Nothing, while 20,000 jobs have been lost in the forest industry. That minister smirks. They smirk about those lost jobs.

We have seen poverty and homelessness grow, we have seen tuition fees skyrocket, and we have seen ferry fees skyrocket. When I asked this government about ferry fees, I told them in question period the story of an elder from Kuper Island who had to collect pop bottles to get home on the ferry, didn't have enough money and was removed from the ferry by the RCMP. Someone in the lineup gave her enough money to get back on.

She got home to Kuper Island, but she got there without her dignity, after her ferry fares went up by over 80 percent. And what was the answer from the Transportation Minister? "Boo hoo." That's the answer that this smug government gives to British Columbians.

We've seen homelessness increase by 375 percent. Poverty rates skyrocket, and they laugh. They laugh.

Interjections.

D. Routley: Do something about it if it's not true. It's not true that homelessness hasn't skyrocketed in this province?

This government ignores everything. They ignore the homeless. They ignore forest workers. They ignore the Auditor General. The Auditor General...

[1055]

Interjections.

Deputy Speaker: Order, Members.

Sit down, Member.

Order.

Interjections.

Deputy Speaker: Members.

Member. Order, Member. Order.

Interjection.

D. Routley: What — speak? Or interrupt, the way you are?

Deputy Speaker: Members.

Order, Member. Take your seat.

Members on both sides of the House, there will be decorum during debate.

Continue, Member.

D. Routley: Well, I guess it's difficult to hear the truth when you represent a government that's responsible for that increase — that skyrocketing in homelessness, that failure to meet the needs of special needs students, that failure to address the skyrocketing poverty rates in this province, that failure to do anything to protect those 20,000 forest workers. That's a litany of failures that no one would be proud of.

I'm not surprised that the members opposite take exception to those facts being enunciated before them. They don't want to hear it. They very studiously become ignorant to those facts. They very studiously found a way to ignore those people and their voices, to ignore their lives — lives lost.

This budget does nothing to improve the lot of seniors who face eviction from manufactured home parks. That was a bill by this government, Bill 27 — a consumer protection bill that was stripped of its protections — and now those residents are at risk. Nothing in the budget for them.

This government and its forest policies disconnected the benefit of resources to community, starved pulp mills of fibre — and nothing in this budget to address those problems. This government obliterated the former apprenticeship program and replaced it with an 8½-by-11 sheet of paper and said that the market would take care of it.

They implemented chaos into a system and were criticized by the Auditor General for doing exactly that. They have no idea how many trade completions are being met at this time, and there's nothing in this budget to address that chaos.

There's nothing in this budget to help those students. They raised tuition fees to the point where students are struggling with debt. They cancelled the student grant program, and there's nothing in this budget to relieve the pressure on students.

The government stands and makes obviously untrue claims — for example, that the Olympics will cost us \$600 million and not a penny more, when the former Auditor General pointed to a \$2.5 billion price tag. This government, of course, dismissed the Auditor General's opinion, as it has with so many other issues.

They still stand, insisting that their truth is the only truth.

[H. Bloy in the chair.]

Hon. T. Christensen: Don't start the clock quite yet, hon. Speaker. I'm going to seek leave to make an introduction first.

Deputy Speaker: Proceed.

Introductions by Members

Hon. T. Christensen: We're joined in the gallery today by 33 students from Ellison Elementary. They're actually

one of three groups of 33 — so 99 altogether, I'm told — students from Ellison Elementary in Vernon who are joining us today. Two out of three groups will have an opportunity to observe the House. Ellison Elementary is actually where each of my children has gone to kindergarten. Look out, Ellison. My youngest one is coming there next year.

[1100]

I want to ensure that the House welcomes all of these, I believe, grade 6 students. They're accompanied by a number of parents, and all of this great tour has been organized by teacher Dan Dueck. Would the House please make all of them very welcome.

Debate Continued

Hon. T. Christensen: I am now pleased to rise in my place and have an opportunity to speak to Budget 2009.

It's always interesting to see what the opposition has to say, and perhaps for the benefit of the students who have joined us today, I can explain a little bit about what goes on in here. We get an opportunity to respond to the budget. It can be a relatively wide-ranging commentary.

You will see a little heckling back and forth now and again, and that is, depending on your point of view, either a good or a bad part of the British parliamentary system. Certainly, it is part of what happens here. Sometimes it's good-natured; sometimes it's not particularly good-natured.

But I think what's important for all observers of this place to do is to listen to what is said, to reflect on what is said and to go and verify what they hear in this place for themselves, because often what you will hear in here may not resemble reality to the extent that many of us might like.

As I said, it is interesting to hear the opposition's view on Budget 2009. Part of the role of an opposition is to point out where they disagree with government, where they feel that government is failing. Opposition members do that, but one hopes in our system that part of opposition as well is to offer ideas, to offer alternatives.

The last member for the opposition provided a list of what he felt were government shortcomings. I think many of us on this side would take issue with a number of his proposed facts, but what was missing, clearly, was any ideas about how to solve some of the challenges that the province faces and that we face in our communities.

Certainly, there were no alternatives suggested, and what we have yet to see from any member of the opposition, and this opposition as a whole, are any cost projections on, you know, how it is we should address the challenges the province faces despite a number of periodic promises from the Leader of the Opposition that a fully costed set of alternatives will be provided.

I am certainly pleased to rise in support of Budget 2009 and have the opportunity to speak to it. This is likely my last opportunity of any significance at least to

speak in this place after being here eight years. This is an incredibly interesting place to spend some of your time, and I think too often many of us, because we do spend a lot of time here, tend to take the grandeur, the importance of this chamber for granted.

As this is likely my last opportunity of any significance, I am told at least that it's perhaps an opportunity to be a little more reflective than one might otherwise have the opportunity to be in this chamber.

J. Les: Just reflect on the opposition.

Hon. T. Christensen: My friend suggests I should reflect on the opposition. I'm not going to do that too much today. I think there are other, more important things to reflect on as I look back over the eight years I've had the opportunity to spend in this place.

I must say, Mr. Speaker, it has been an extraordinary privilege to serve the community that I grew up in, the community that I have always called home and that I certainly intend to continue to call home. It's the community that my parents, my grandparents, my great-grandparents called home, and it is the community that my children call home.

I am pleased to call it home because it is an extraordinary place. The citizens, my constituents, are extraordinary people, and I have come to really recognize that even more so in the eight years that I have had the privilege to serve them. I want to thank the citizens of the Okanagan-Vernon constituency for placing their faith in me, for placing me here on two occasions — in the 2001 election and then again in 2005.

[1105]

What I have found in my role as MLA is that there are what I tend to think of as three general roles that you fill as an MLA. One, certainly, is your role in respect of your individual constituents who will come to your office — this is true for members of government and true for members of the opposition — where a particular individual constituent may have a challenge in accessing a provincial program, may be having a problem working through a provincial program. You're able to provide them assistance.

I think every member of this House would agree that in doing that type of constituency work, thankfully, we are very ably assisted by our constituency assistants, who remain in our offices around the province while we come and spend time here in Victoria. I want to say a special thank-you to the staff that have assisted me in my constituency office over the last eight years, my current staff, Kristen. Prior to Kristen, Michelle was there. Janice and Marjorie have filled in from time to time when people have been on holidays.

But the one constant in my office over the last eight years and, in fact, prior to me being there was Min Sidhu. Min is a constituency assistant extraordinaire among

constituency assistants. I consistently hear that from my constituents. I hear that from my colleagues. I hear that from staff and ministers' offices. I want to extend a special thank-you to Min for her commitment to the citizens of Okanagan-Vernon over the last eight years.

So that's the one role, the sort of individual constituent work. A second role is the role that I think we all play in advocating for what I will call the sort of usual-type capital projects. I think we can all name transportation projects, health projects, education projects, infrastructure projects in our ridings. We try to figure out what are the right funding programs that might assist in moving those things along. I'm going to speak a little bit more about those in a moment.

The third one is the one that I've always found the most interesting, and it really is where I am thankful to so many of my constituents. That third role is where you have the opportunity to assist groups in your community who are trying to do something new, who have identified a need in your community, who have come together as citizens and have said: "You know what? We've got something we've got to work on here."

They've had ingenuity. They've had a vision, and they've brought people together. They come to you as MLA and say: "Okay, we need your assistance now to try and figure out how it is that the province might assist in realizing this vision."

As I've said, I am incredibly fortunate to live in a community and to serve a number of communities in my riding that really have a can-do attitude, where groups of citizens do come together to identify the community's needs and to get things done. I have always been incredibly honoured to be asked to and to be able to assist those groups in realizing their efforts and their vision for a better community.

As I thought and reflected on the last eight years, I thought it's important that I talk a bit about some of those projects, because my community is a remarkably different place today than it was eight years ago. While I've been happy to play some role in that, the reality is that many of the very good things that have occurred in my community over the last eight years are because of the vision and the efforts of people at a grass-roots level in the community, who have then trusted me to assist them in moving particular projects forward.

One that stands out, and others have spoken of this type of service in this House as well, is Vernon's Hospice House. We have had a hospice society in Vernon for a number of years that has provided counselling and support to people who are at the end of their lives and to those individuals' families.

In the late 1990s our community built a hospice house. Everybody fundraised, and they built a freestanding hospice. They built that without any commitment from the government of the day that there would be operating funding for it.

When I was running in 2001, that was one of the issues that was very early on brought to my attention. There was going to be a need — because that was right at the time that the Hospice House actually was opening its doors, for operating funding.

It didn't happen right away, but what we were able to do through 2001-2002 was to emphasize to the health authority of the day, to Interior Health, the importance of Hospice House to Vernon, the role that it played in a continuum of care for patients in the North Okanagan. We were able to secure some operating funding from the health authority at that time.

What has subsequently happened over the last eight years is that everybody has recognized the incredible benefit, the incredible care that is provided at Hospice House. Over the last couple of years the community realized that they needed to make this place bigger, so they fundraised again. They doubled the size of Vernon's Hospice House so that now there are 12 beds available for people at the end of their lives, where their families can gather around them, where their families can be provided support in those very challenging times.

I'm very pleased that Interior Health is a significant partner in ensuring that Hospice is a success and in funding 12 beds so that patients in the North Okanagan have that opportunity for the most effective palliative care possible.

Another program that's new, which I often forget about because it's now been around for about six years, and which was driven by a group of local citizens who had a vision, was a new aircraft maintenance engineer program at Okanagan College. It was a pretty big dream to try and bring that type of complex program into an institution that had nothing like it.

A number of citizens — Dr. Kurt Latham, a family physician in town, stands out as one whose perseverance has certainly paid off — sat down with Okanagan College and figured out who they could partner with around the province to ensure that this type of learning opportunity is provided to students in Vernon. They were successful because they didn't give up.

They had a vision, and they were prepared to be creative and recognize that we don't need to build a whole new program from the ground up. You can actually partner with other institutions. They partnered with Northern Lights College out of Dawson Creek, so now students in the North Okanagan have that opportunity.

We have a new indoor soccer facility in Vernon — soccer, the most popular sport in British Columbia in terms of participation. It was the dream of many involved in Vernon minor soccer and in adult soccer to have an indoor facility, because we actually have winter, unlike here in Victoria.

A group of citizens came together. They said: "We're going to make this happen." They worked with the regional district to ensure that they could borrow the

dollars. Then they approached the province and said: "How is it that we can move this along? How is it the province can assist?" Through some of the Olympic Live Sites funding, we were able to assist in ensuring that the indoor soccer facility actually had a roof. That's a pretty critical part of an indoor soccer facility.

Now, I think it's fair to say that the Vernon facility is the envy of many other communities around the province, and it's something that wasn't built by government, wasn't initiated by government. In fact, it was the dream of a number of local citizens who said that our kids need this, and they made it happen. The province was fortunate to be a partner in it, and I certainly felt privileged to assist in helping move that along.

One of the challenges we hear about in this House often — and I think there's no denying it's a challenge — is homelessness around our province. Vernon by no means was immune to that challenge. We could see the impacts of homelessness in our downtown core. Talking to community policing, talking to local business, they certainly would tell of those impacts.

[1115]

A relatively large group in the community, driven by the social planning council but involving the business community and community policing, said: "You know what? We've got to come up with solutions to this." Vernon now has a state-of-the-art homeless shelter with 24-7 availability right in the downtown core. It's been open now about six months.

What's critical is that although there was, I think it's fair to say, considerable angst within the community when it was first going to be located, it has been exemplary in ensuring that the businesses around the shelter are involved, are told about what's going on.

There is nobody that I'm aware of who is not saying what a success this has been in our downtown core, again because a large group of local citizens said that we need to make this happen for the people of Vernon. They set the vision. They looked at the elements that needed to be involved. They did the groundwork, and they then came to the province, to B.C. Housing, and said: "We now need your help." Government was able to respond to that initiative of the local community and provide the help.

The treehouse project is a new building to replace what was.... Actually, it had originally been a gas station-garage, I think, and then became a child development centre at one point. That's a pretty extraordinary leap, to go from being a garage to being a child development centre. They did exemplary work. Well, they now do that exemplary work in a brand-new project, I think aptly called the treehouse.

It is a new building on the same site that, again, the community fundraised for. They recognized that the children in our community, those with special needs in particular, needed an updated facility so that the

professionals in our community could do that important work in the best facility possible. The province was able to assist in some of the capital funding of that program through the direct access gaming funds. Again, it's a community-driven initiative that, as an MLA, you have the privilege of trying to identify how it is that at a provincial level of government you can assist in ensuring that occurs.

In 2005 little old Vernon hosted the Nordic World Cup. The top cross-country skiers from around the globe converged at Sovereign Lake Nordic ski area right next to Silver Star and showed us what we'll all get to experience in the Callaghan Valley in the 2010 Winter Olympics. It was an extraordinary event. It was an extraordinary undertaking for a relatively small Nordic ski club in the community of Vernon.

But they undertook it. They identified what needed to be done. They got the approvals from the international community, from the Canadian cross-country community, and they were then able to come to government with a strong proposal about an opportunity to bring the world to the North Okanagan. Government was able to respond, and I'm thankful to all of those citizens that made that event such a success in 2005.

We've seen land provided in Lumby to assist citizens there in trying to develop some seniors housing. There's still work to do on that front, but because of the vision of the community, the identification of the need for land, the province was able to respond in identifying what land could be provided.

In Cherryville they're in the process, after very many years of trying, of obtaining their own community forest. A community that has a proud forestry background is now finally getting the opportunity to pursue a community forest, again because you had a number of citizens that proved they were going to be able to do it. The province was able to respond.

Mr. Speaker, I'm sure that I'm forgetting many others. I think the point I am emphasizing is that it is strong communities that come up with these ideas, that identify the need. It's people at the ground level, at the grass-roots level, who say: "You know what? This is what I'm seeing in my community. This is where I see an opportunity." What they need at a provincial level is responsive government.

[1120]

What I've seen in my eight years here is a government that has said to communities: "Tell us what your dreams are, tell us what your vision is, and we'll try to work with you to accomplish that." We have a great long list of examples and projects in my community that demonstrate exactly that. I want to applaud and thank my constituents for their vision and for their efforts and for allowing me to work with them in realizing some of those goals.

I think that beyond those citizen-initiated efforts, there's been significant investment by this government in what I referred to as the usual capital projects a little earlier, all

of which make the three communities — Vernon, Lumby, Coldstream — and the outlying areas that I serve very different places today than they were eight years ago. We've seen significant investments in transportation, for example, with the Swan Lake interchange.

We're going to see the four-laning of the last sort of remnant of a non-four lane between Vernon and Kelowna along Wood Lake. We're going to see a four-lane highway from Vernon north to Armstrong. All of those make a significant difference.

In fact, many of the investments in the Trans-Canada Highway — the Kicking Horse bridge in the Columbia River-Revelstoke riding — actually have a pretty significant impact on the Okanagan. As I think most members of this House will recognize, the Okanagan is a place where tourists like to come, and that link to Alberta is a critical one in terms of our market for the Okanagan.

I know of a number of actual local businesses that are very sort of tourism oriented. The biggest thing that ever happened to them was the Kicking Horse bridge. It was a bit of a surprise to me that it would have that big an impact on some of my constituents. But that's not me saying it; they told me that.

We've seen significant infrastructure investments in water and sewer with the Duteau Creek plant; the Mission Hill water treatment plant; sewer funding in Vernon, Lumby, and Coldstream over the last eight years. Those are the types of investments that are necessary as we face aging infrastructure and as we need to move our communities forward.

We speak in this place a lot about health care. I think most members of this House would agree that perhaps some of the greatest challenges the province faces as we look out over the next five, ten, 20 years will continue to be in ensuring that we're able to provide the health care services that our constituents need. We've seen a dramatic increase in funding over the last eight years for health care. But what really matters is where those dollars hit the ground. What does it mean in terms of services in our communities?

In my community, in respect to seniors care, we've seen significant upgrades and improvements to Noric House and to the Gateby, both residential care seniors facilities that have been there for some time. We've seen a doubling of the Bethany Home — which is now called Heritage Square — so that twice as many seniors can reside there and be provided the care they need in a modern, new facility.

We've seen the development of Heron Grove, another brand-new facility; Creekside Landing, another brand-new facility. These are providing literally hundreds of additional spaces, residences, modernized, providing the care that seniors need in Vernon and in the North Okanagan as a whole.

Vernon Jubilee Hospital is certainly a hospital close to my heart. I used to sit on the hospital foundation board.

It's also the hospital that all of my children were born at and that my brothers and I were all born at and my father and his brothers. So we've been around there a while.

We've seen a doubling of the emergency room in the last couple of years as well as the out-patient services — all as an interim measure recognizing that there needs to be significant expansion of that hospital. That, I am pleased to say, is what is happening now, with shovels in the ground, on a new \$170 million expansion of Vernon Jubilee Hospital that is going to ensure that citizens of the North Okanagan can count on the most modern facilities for their health care in the future.

[1125]

One very significant infrastructure investment that isn't right in my riding, but I believe, when we look back 20 years from now, we will recognize has had a profound impact on the Okanagan as a whole, is the establishment of UBC Okanagan right across the street from the Kelowna Airport.

I can tell you that when I was first elected in 2001, one of the top issues that I heard about was the need for a full-status university in the Okanagan. At that time most people envisioned the growth of Okanagan University College and switching that to becoming a university.

As the different options were examined and the idea of establishing a UBC campus in the Okanagan came forth, there was, I think it's fair to say, some resistance from some quarters to that and certainly some uncertainty. But I have no doubt that the establishment of UBC in the Okanagan, a world-class public university with a worldwide reputation, has made and will continue to make a profound impact in the Okanagan, a profound impact in terms of the opportunity that it provides for students in the North Okanagan.

While in Vernon we may think of UBCO as being a university in Kelowna, I can tell you it is as much our university in Vernon, Lumby, Cherryville, Coldstream, Armstrong, up to Salmon Arm, as it is anywhere else. It takes me, as a resident of Vernon, about 35 minutes to get to UBCO. I can tell you that it probably takes that long to get from the other side of Kelowna to UBCO.

For students familiar with the Lower Mainland, a 35-minute commute isn't particularly unusual. Now they've introduced a new bus service that links the communities in the North Okanagan to UBCO, and it really is making a difference in terms of the opportunities that it is providing to students.

It's \$150 million capital investment. I always remind myself that I need to pop into UBCO about once every two months. If I don't, I won't recognize the place, because there's so much building going on. The new medical school — opening, I believe, next year — is going to make a remarkable difference in terms of expanding opportunities for the students in the Okanagan.

As I say, I think that when we look back 20 years from now at how the Okanagan will have changed, we're going

to be able to align a number of those changes with the establishment of UBC Okanagan in the Okanagan.

I also want to comment on Okanagan College. As part of the expansion of post-secondary education and the changes and the establishment of UBCO, it actually enabled a refocus of the mandate of Okanagan College, such that it is the fastest-growing trades-training institution in the province, I am told. It is one that has embraced its new mandate wholeheartedly and is working hard in communities throughout the Okanagan to provide extraordinary services to students and expand much-needed trades opportunities. So overall, just a huge success story on the post-secondary education front.

I certainly will leave this place after eight years knowing that the opportunities and the quality of life for residents of the North Okanagan has vastly improved over the last eight years due to the efforts of the government that I have been privileged and proud to be part of — most importantly, our ability to work with citizens of my constituency to make our communities and our future stronger.

I've had the privilege to serve in three different ministries here. I've obviously talked too much because the green light is on. I wanted to talk a little bit about those three ministries, because they've each been different and, as I say, they've each been an extraordinary privilege, but I don't have time for that.

I will say this, though. I have felt incredibly privileged to be served in each of those ministries by an exceptional public service, people whose dedication to the work they do is remarkable. I think all of us in this House, all citizens of British Columbia, owe a debt of gratitude to our public servants for the work they do day in, day out on our behalf, often — certainly, in the ministries I've served in — in what can be very difficult circumstances and dealing with very difficult issues.

I also want to say a thank-you to the citizens of British Columbia. You know, as a minister, you get to meet people from all parts of this province and hear their ideas about British Columbia — what they're concerned about, what they think is working, how they think things can be made better. I've always found those conversations, at least the vast majority of them, to be incredibly insightful, respectful and valuable. So I thank the citizens of British Columbia.

[1130]

My final thank-yous are perhaps the most important ones. I want to thank my kids. I know that for my eldest son, the last time he saw sort of a recording of me standing in this place, his response was: "Well, Dad, you sure talk a lot." Certainly, I've done that today. I'm very much looking forward to spending a little more time with the three of them and to a little more involvement in their lives.

My final thank-you — and I understand that the red light is on, so please indulge me — is to my wife Jennifer. All of us know the burden we place on our spouses when we spend time here. Imagine doing that with three young

children. Actually, in some ways, perhaps, she has set me up, because I owe her big-time for a long time now.

When people ask, "How do you do this?" the answer is that I have an incredible wife, who holds the fort at home, who is responsible for so much of my children's success to date in life. I am very much looking forward to spending more time with her and to carrying a little bit more of my share of the opportunity and the responsibility for raising our children.

So to Jennifer: thank you.

As I've often said to my constituents who think I might be doing something good here and appreciate the work I've done, you have my wife to thank, because there's no way I would be here without her support at home. Certainly, I will take full blame for the things you don't think I'm doing right.

R. Fleming: Before I begin, I want to thank the minister for speaking from the heart this morning and for his eight years of public service, which he summed up very eloquently, and for some of the achievements that physically stand in his community and some of the people he's worked with there over the years and the sacrifice, of course, that it has meant for his family and for his spouse in particular.

You have eight years of payback, no doubt, to look forward to, Minister, but the people of B.C. appreciate the service that you've given, and I know your communities do as well.

The minister took the high road and made his final address and decided to talk about a number of things. I will be responding this morning very directly to the budget that was tabled in this place a few weeks ago — taking the high road as well, Member, but speaking particularly to some of the content of that budget as it relates to my community and to my critic areas in particular.

I would like to outline a number of points this morning that explain why I think this budget missed the mark and came up short against the huge fiscal challenges we face not only here in British Columbia but in most jurisdictions across the world now in our global economy.

The primary problem for me with this budget is that even if we were living in ordinary times, which we most certainly are not, this budget would be a very banal and unmemorable document. There is not a real vision in this budget to make our province more economically diverse; to make our communities safer from gun violence; to advance social justice and fairness; to give opportunities to our young people; and to build on the prosperity that we have enjoyed for many, many decades in British Columbia, something that we can never be complacent about.

[1135]

What I think is worse is that it's placed against the backdrop of extraordinary times in our global economy — the great uncertainty; the anxiety that people have; the

displacement of tens of thousands of British Columbians from their jobs; and the hardship that that causes for their families, especially in our resource communities. Placed against all of that, this budget is an underwhelming response. It fails to meet the test to provide adequate strategic economic stimulus that is needed to stimulate and boost our province's short-term outlook, which is an outlook of negative economic growth, so that we can emerge on the other side of this recession a stronger province.

Now, this budget, bizarrely, is far, far outside the economic mainstream and the consensus around the world about how governments should respond to the crisis we find ourselves in. The Davos economic summit, the International Monetary Fund, the new U.S. Treasury Secretary, even Prime Minister Harper, have urged a far more robust response than what this British Columbia budget offers. The International Monetary Fund is calling for a full 2 percent of GDP to be filled with accelerated projects and investment by government in infrastructure and human capital, the skills and knowledge of the citizenry in advanced countries.

That's a point I want to return to later on, but let me begin by outlining why I think this budget is fundamentally dishonest. We first need to remember that this is, in effect, an illegal budget. The government made a great deal of the fact that it was so fiscally prudent that it would forever banish deficits from B.C.'s books. It was so sure of itself that it said that any minister who is incompetent enough to exceed their own budget due to unforeseen circumstances would be penalized personally.

We were told that under the B.C. Liberals, we would enter a brave and new fiscal world. But with this new era of supposed ministerial responsibility, you have to read the fine print. You have to read the escape clause, the get-out-of-jail-free card that is built into that legislation.

The B.C. Liberals, as we've seen — and this session is no different — set the stage every year for an escape hatch by introducing a bizarre and surreal practice of a ministerial accountability bases act. Just as the leaves grow on the trees every spring, you can be sure that that legislation will be introduced — and it was again this year — so that no minister will suffer the indignity of a clawback in their pay for failing to do what the legislation says they cannot do, which is overspend in their budget area. The legislation in this context is completely meaningless — 11 times in a row, 11 get-out-of-jail-free cards used by ministers so they won't suffer a single penny from their own pocket.

Following on that logic, that flawed logic in legislation that doesn't work, the government also said some years ago that deficits were illegal in the province of British Columbia. They said that until they actually discovered they needed to run one, which in February they officially acknowledged. For the record, this budget brings the Liberal record to six out of ten fiscal years that will be

in the red. That's their record: six out of ten in the red. That's a failing grade.

Fortunately for the Minister of Finance, government has a well-established precedent, an entirely predictable pattern. Earlier this February they passed a bill. They came into this place before the throne speech was dropped, and they passed a bill that said, in effect, that deficits are still illegal, except when the Premier says they're legal. That was the substance of the bill that was debated here for a week.

Problem solved. When the legislation doesn't work, the Premier comes and says: "We're going to fix it." He says: "We're going to maintain the legislation that makes deficits illegal, except when I say they aren't, as in this year and the next fiscal year." That's how they solve the problem.

They don't fix the flawed legislation in the first place, which somehow tried to banish markets from behaving as if they have ups and downs and normal business cycles that we've observed over hundreds of years of economic activity. They don't fix that. They carry on.

[1140]

In spite of the government's hypocrisy in introducing that legislation, I actually voted to support the bill that allowed the government to run a deficit this year. It's not because I like the bill. It's because I was worried about what this government would do to people who actually need the government's help in these times — what the government would do to them if they tried to balance the budget on the backs of those people during a global financial meltdown. That's what the opposition had to consider in deciding how it would vote on that legislation.

So while I voted and supported the bill out of necessity, I firmly believe that it was a fundamentally dishonest piece of legislation, because it allows the government to maintain a fiction. It allows the government to avoid coming clean with British Columbians.

This brings me to other objections I have about this budget. The Minister of Finance tabled a budget in this place that claims government will run a \$495 million deficit in 2009-2010 and a \$245 million deficit in 2010-2011, after which, we're told to believe, the clouds will part, the rain will stop and the world will be rosy and economically stable once more.

Now, let's leave aside, because my colleagues have covered this well, some of the problems in this budget on its optimistic revenue assumptions — the fact that sales taxes are projected to go up in this budget year, when retail sales are in serious trouble in British Columbia and more so than in most parts of the country, or the fact that personal income tax revenues are projected to go up in this budget, when we're seeing tens of thousands of British Columbians in January alone apply for employment insurance and tens of thousands more coming off employment insurance onto other forms of relief.

They're not working. Unemployment rates are going up, but this budget assumes that income taxes will increase.

Let's set aside B.C. Hydro, which is projected to bring hundreds of millions more dollars into the government's coffers this year — very optimistic indeed on the revenue side.

The problem I want to speak to here and now is that in order to present, let alone achieve, this budget's numbers, the Finance Minister actually had to ignore the advice of his immediate predecessor. So I'd like to go back to last year, when Carole Taylor was the Minister of Finance, and read her advice in tabling that budget.

She said:

"To help ensure targets are met, the updated fiscal plan includes forecast allowances of \$750 million in 2008-2009 and \$675 million in both 2009-10 and 2010-11. In addition, the budget includes contingencies of \$375 million in those years, representing 1 percent of total spending. This budget includes a further \$400 million for the next round of compensation contract negotiations."

That was a year ago, from a different Finance Minister, who set that forth as the benchmark for prudence. Let me put that in perspective. If this current Finance Minister had heeded the advice of his immediate predecessor, who held that portfolio and remained prudent, he would have been forced to table in this very House a deficit of \$1.2 billion this year and \$1.3 billion the following year.

Instead, after allowing a large contingency forecast in every B.C. Liberal budget, which sometimes resulted in deficits and sometimes resulted in surpluses, this Finance Minister and the Premier have now gutted the budget of any room for error. In other words, just as global risks and exposures of our economy are going up, the B.C. Liberals' prudence has gone down with this new Finance Minister.

[1145]

If they were more honest, they would tell British Columbians just what they are exposing them to. They would say to them, in effect, "In place of prudence, our contingency plan is actually to slash public services," because that's the only option they will be left with if they're going to maintain the fiction that the budget deficit for this year is \$495 million. That's what they'll be doing to get to that bottom line. With no fiscal forecast allowance, there's no room for error, and they will cut services to the bone very quickly. That is a key objection to this budget. It is so unrealistic in this respect.

I think every member in this House knows full well that no matter what the outcome of the next election, we are going to be back in this place in the summer, or in September at the very latest, debating real deficit projections that aren't a convenient pre-election fiction.

I also object to what this budget does to Advanced Education and Tourism. Education is a critical area for stimulus spending, yet this budget actually cuts money to research-and-development agencies over the next three years, like the B.C. Innovation Council. It turns its back on this government's promise of stable, secure, multi-year funding to our colleges and universities.

In fact, years 2 and 3 of this budget will starve Advanced Education. It will require our 26 public post-secondary institutions to lay off faculty, researchers, cancel programs and return B.C. to the dark days when this government hit students with 30 percent tuition fee increases annually, year after year.

All of that will happen if this budget stands. If this Ministry of Advanced Education budget remains frozen at \$2 billion and the scheduled increase in funding two years from now of \$1 million to be divided between 26 colleges and universities stands, that is exactly what that will mean — structural deficits and deep cuts and lobbying of the like you've never seen to raise tuition fees at the rate that the Liberals did in 2002-2005 — double-digit increases. That's why this budget is a fiction.

Advanced Education. It will mean that regional institutions like the College of the Rockies, Capilano University, Camosun College, Vancouver Island University, UVic, SFU and Okanagan College are going to face structural deficits as their costs grow and provincial funding dries up.

We know that these institutions aren't allowed to run deficits by legislation, and it's real legislation in their case. So they will look at laying off staff. They will look at cutting programs. They will be eliminating student spaces. They will have to consider all of these unsavoury options, which are the wrong ones for British Columbia at a time when we need to train and provide opportunities for more of our young people to keep our economy strong and to make this a fairer place. Those will be the wrong choices that administrators and boards have to face, but that's exactly what will happen.

Again, I want to go back to contrast this budget to the consensus in the rest of the industrial world. The Prime Minister of the U.K., Gordon Brown, visited the United States Congress a few weeks ago, and he urged the United States and other countries to heed a point that was completely missed by this government in this budget.

He said, in contrast to this government:

"We must educate our way out of the downturn...invest and invent our way out of the downturn...retool and re-skill our way out of the downturn.... Every time we rebuild a school, we demonstrate our faith in the future. Every time we send more young people to university, every time we invest more in new digital infrastructure, every time we increase support to our scientists, we demonstrate our faith in the future."

Well, those very salient points couldn't have been more wide of the mark by the response of this government in this budget. Just south of us the Obama administration is making investments like this, like Prime Minister Brown urged, again in contrast to the B.C. Liberal government in this budget. The Americans know that at the other end of this recession the world doesn't go back to the way it just was.

[1150]

When one looks at the decline in labour productivity per person in British Columbia, when one looks at the \$40 billion trade deficit that this province has as a jurisdiction, when

we look at the lag we have in university-based research and development vis-à-vis Alberta or Ontario or Quebec, where they're making massive investments of this kind, which are essential to discovery, to innovation, to patents, to new companies and new jobs.... When one looks at all of this, one has to ask: why isn't B.C. doing more?

The Obama stimulus package, in contrast, offers \$12 billion in new funding for the American research-granting councils. If we were to follow suit and keep pace here in British Columbia, we could anticipate \$113 million in new money just for research alone. Instead, we have the Michael Smith Foundation out wondering how it will survive next year because its revenues haven't been confirmed by this government. We have the research community saying, "We would like to make this a leading-edge research cluster for the Pacific Northwest, for North America, for the world," and the support isn't there.

If we were to have put in an equivalent grant to the one that I just spoke of that happened from the Obama administration, it would immediately support in our province \$175 million in new economic activity and would create just shy of 2,000 direct and 2,500 indirect jobs in this year. This doesn't even begin to account for the value that genuine, groundbreaking discovery and intellectual property would accrue to our universities as partial owners of that and to our improved health care outcomes, for example, which we would enjoy as a product of that sponsored research.

Let's face it. When we talk about some of the serious challenges that British Columbia has, when we talk about how we might reinvent our forestry sector, when we talk about how we might keep wild salmon so our children and grandchildren know what that is and save a viable working fishery on the coast, when we talk about extracting resources in the mining sector or in other resource industries and doing that in a sustainable way.... When we talk about all of that, most of it is just a concept. We still need to find out how to do it.

We need the research and discovery and breakthrough technology that can be taken to the market in order to do all of those things that we talk about. We need to link it with industry so that B.C. can actually be in a position of moving bioenergy and new products from our dead forest floors to the market so that the Chileans and Norwegians and others are coming to look at British Columbia for our new technologies — closed-containment technologies, for example, which are saving our wild salmon fishery from disease and decline.

That's what British Columbia needs to do to reinvent itself and make itself strong and prosperous coming out the other side of this recession. The basis for that is not in this budget. Instead, we see shortsighted cuts of the most ridiculous kind to the community that's actually engaged in this kind of research.

You know, just the other day in the paper there was an interesting article about how leading climatologists and B.C. researchers looking at climate change are actually going to Australia and the United States because their research activity is supported there.

[Mr. Speaker in the chair.]

It's not here, not nearly to the same degree. We're losing those people. Now, one would think, with the Premier's interest in talking about that topic, that he'd have concern about that, that he would have identified this as a looming problem within the sector, that he would have supported the research community in British Columbia. Well, the budget is the statement of intent to do exactly that, and this budget failed to do that.

We know that we need to diversify our economy to create wealth in a new, knowledge-based economy. Premier McGuinty knows that in Ontario. He has a plan in his possession, which was authored by Richard Florida, that looks at the very difficult, multi-year transition that Ontario is going to have to make from being an automobile and manufacturing centre of this country to shift toward a highly educated, high-output, knowledge-based economy in Ontario.

[1155]

If it wants to stop decline, if it wants to preserve high incomes and be a prosperous jurisdiction with a large middle class, if it wants to claim its stake and create the jobs of the future, it's going to have to do that.

They have a plan that was commissioned. What have we done? We've ignored warnings from our own Progress Board, the Premier's own Progress Board, that our province isn't investing enough in research and development. The finding that we actually have the worst record of support for researchers among Canadian provinces and that we have the lowest production of PhDs, doctorates, in the country.... Those are warning signs, and these were warnings that were issued several years ago.

We've had a Campus 2020 process. We've had visioning exercises. We have so many reports that are gathering dust that speak to all of these points, and none of them have ever made it into this government's budget, even in extraordinary times like this one, where we're facing a serious economic downturn and we know we need to reinvent ourselves for tomorrow. Even now, in these times, it's not there.

Noting the hour, I reserve my place to continue in this debate after we adjourn debate.

R. Fleming moved adjournment of debate.

Motion approved.

Hon. T. Christensen moved adjournment of the House.

Motion approved.

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

The House adjourned at 11:57 a.m.

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