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THE HONOURABLE BILL BARISOFF, SPEAKER

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LIEUTENANT-GOVERNOR
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FIRST SESSION, 39TH PARLIAMENT

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TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 3, 2009

The House met at 10:03 a.m.

[Mr. Speaker in the chair.]

Prayers.

Orders of the Day

Hon. M. de Jong: Good morning, Mr. Speaker. In Committee A, I call Committee of Supply — for the information of members, the estimates of the Ministry of Community and Rural Development; in this chamber, second reading of Bill 21, the Ambulance Services Collective Agreement Act.

Second Reading of Bills

BILL 21 — AMBULANCE SERVICES COLLECTIVE AGREEMENT ACT

Hon. K. Falcon: I move second reading of Bill 21, the Ambulance Services Collective Agreement Act.

This legislation will end the strike by CUPE 873, the union representing B.C.'s 3,500 ambulance paramedics and dispatchers, bringing a legislative end to this dispute.

[C. Trevena in the chair.]

The decision to introduce this legislation was a difficult one and certainly not one we came to lightly. We value the work and services provided by B.C.'s paramedics, but our priority is to ensure the safety of British Columbians and to make certain that patients get the care they need in the event of a medical emergency.

In the Lower Mainland the number of ambulances out of service each month has jumped to 150 compared to just 12 before the strike began, and right now our entire health system is operating at full capacity to manage the impact of the H1N1 pandemic.

[1005]

While the system is coping as best it can, we know that pressure is mounting in both our emergency departments and critical care areas right across the province. Our health authorities are under additional stress from growing absenteeism from influenza-like illnesses, which are on the rise.

Fortunately, to date there have been no adverse patient outcomes directly attributable to the dispute so far, but every day the strike continues, it increases the risk to patients. We've had a number of near misses, and we cannot afford to go another day with our ambulance service operating at less than its full potential.

B.C.'s paramedics began their job action on April 1, earlier this year, and for the past seven months the two

parties have been working to come to a mutually satisfactory settlement. We are doing this in the midst of one of the toughest economic times we've seen in at least a generation. Despite this, we have tried to reach a fair agreement that addresses paramedics' concerns while recognizing the economic challenges that we face in government.

It's important to recognize that expenditures on paramedic wages have risen 83 percent, from \$78 million in the year 2000 to \$144 million in the 2008-2009 fiscal year. The most recent offer made by the B.C. Ambulance Service was very generous, given B.C.'s current economic environment, and was in keeping with what other public sector workers will receive in 2009-10.

While we must recognize that the union and B.C. Ambulance management agreed to a number of key items, unfortunately, the offer was not fully accepted by the union. We simply cannot wait for the union to confirm that its membership has followed their direction to reject the latest offer. Waiting does not move us any further forward and, in fact, only demonstrates how broken the current labour relations structure really is.

The settlement we've put forward in the Ambulance Services Collective Agreement Act reflects the key elements of the final offer made to the union by the B.C. Ambulance Service during the last round of talks in September.

It is a one-year deal, retroactive to April 1, 2009, and it includes a competitive compensation increase of 3 percent in wages this year, in line with other public sector workers. This is an increase that was accepted by the union as recently as September. The September offer also included a further 1.2 percent increase, contingent on both sides finding efficiencies within the collective agreement in which to fund the additional 1.2 percent.

The B.C. Ambulance Service is still willing to work collaboratively with the union to achieve the 1.2 percent, if their position changes. In addition, we will be calling on the Minister of Labour to appoint an industrial inquiry commissioner as soon as possible to identify options for repairing the broken labour relations structure between the B.C. Ambulance Service and CUPE 873 before the next round of bargaining in the new year.

Approximately one-third of all the ambulance stations in B.C. are designated as remote. I mention that because the issues that confront rural paramedics, in particular, are unique, but they are important. We very much hope to build on the work we're already doing to help address the challenge of recruitment and retention in these rural and remote stations.

It does bear repeating — which I want the rural paramedics, in particular, to know — that we recognize and agree with many of those rural paramedics who say that the current structure doesn't work for them. I am personally committed to making sure that we address those concerns, to the benefit of rural paramedics.

Now, as mentioned earlier, the decision to implement this legislation was not one we made lightly, but it

became clear after this length of time, seven months, that we had simply reached an impasse and that there was no realistic possibility of a negotiated settlement between the B.C. Ambulance Service and CUPE 873. Ultimately, this legislation is about protecting patients and ensuring the safety of the citizens of British Columbia. This legislation also reflects our concern that the longer this situation continues, the higher the risk for patients.

[1010]

We are seeing increased numbers of British Columbians presenting with the H1N1 flu virus. In fact, B.C.'s rate of positive tests for H1N1 is already several times higher than the rest of Canada. Fortunately, most of the H1N1 cases continue to be mild to moderate in severity, but as the number of cases rises, as we anticipate they will in the weeks ahead, we are going to see the numbers of people seriously injured also climb.

Yes, we have strategies in place to ensure that the health system is ready. That's why we have ensured that we've got enough vaccine for any British Columbian who ultimately wants or needs it. It's why we are allowing doctors to provide consultations over the phone with patients who suspect they might have the H1N1, on an unlimited basis and be compensated for that. It's why British Columbians are aware that they can call the 811 line day or night if they have any questions or concerns about the flu or symptoms that they are feeling.

These measures are not complete if our ambulance service remains on strike. We need to be certain that this service is operating at peak effectiveness during times of challenge, and we need to ensure that the ambulance service will be there if patients are in distress or if we require critical transfers to hospital ICU beds to access ventilators.

We have seen, during this dispute, that patients have been put at greater risk because paramedics are not as available to work as compared to what the situation was prior to the strike. We need British Columbians to be confident that when they call an ambulance, whether it is in the middle of the day or the middle of the night, one will be on their doorstep as soon as possible and that a labour disruption is not going to get in the way of ensuring that they get the kind of medical care they need when they need it.

We are moving into a very busy holiday season, which means more British Columbians will be out on B.C.'s roads and highways, visiting family, taking trips and going to holiday events. We all hope for a safe holiday season, but this is one of the busier times of the year and, for many people, a stressful time. We need to be prepared for increased injuries and illness as the holidays approach.

I want to conclude my remarks by again emphasizing, as I did at the beginning of my speech, the important role — indeed, the vital role — that paramedics play as first responders when a medical emergency strikes. We

appreciate the work that paramedics do every day to ensure the health and well-being of British Columbians.

This legislation provides paramedics with what we believe to be a fair package, given the current economic climate, and ensures that this vital service will be there when British Columbians need it.

I know that all members of this House recognize that this is a difficult thing to do. But I also know that all members of this House understand and are concerned with the fact that we have a health system right now that is being taxed as we deliver with the challenge of the H1N1 pandemic. All of us, every health care professional today, is doing everything they can to try and deal with this situation in a professional manner in the best interests of British Columbians.

It is no different on the paramedical side. We need to have all medical professionals working together as we deal with the challenges of H1N1.

With that, Madam Speaker, I move second reading.

R. Chouhan: The only way this Bill 21 and the action of this government can be described is appalling. Just to put it mildly, it's shocking to see that this government, rather than admitting its failure to engage itself in free collective bargaining, has decided to use a very heavy-handed approach.

What we saw yesterday in this House, by the introduction of Bill 21, is the government again confirming its attitude, its lack of understanding and its total, total disregard for workers' rights in British Columbia.

[1015]

We have seen the same movie played here in this House when Bill 29 was introduced early in their first mandate in 2002. Rather than learning a lesson from Bill 29, the government has chosen to continue on the same destructive path that they have been following for the last many years.

The Minister of Health this morning has been standing in the House talking about that the main reason to introduce Bill 21 is the H1N1 pandemic. That's complete nonsense. H1N1 is nothing new. That has been going on for months and weeks. This dispute has been going on for months.

Where were they four years ago when this union and the paramedics asked for a meaningful engagement in labour relations, asked for the appointment of an independent arbitrator to deal with these issues that the minister is talking of today?

When the paramedics went on strike in April, that issue of arbitration was there. It was raised not only by paramedics; it was also raised during the last election. But the government chose not to act upon that request. They were sitting and waiting and hoping that it would just go away. If they had acted upon the union's request months ago, this dispute would have been resolved long, long ago.

Now for the minister to stand here and blame the paramedics.... It's shameful what we heard today, saying that patients have been put at risk because the paramedics were not available. What nonsense. Paramedics are always available. We have an essential services order. All this bill does, basically.... It's practically just adding maybe 16 more paramedics to the total number of paramedics that are available under the order. So it is not going to be helping anybody more than the help that is already available.

For the minister to use that cover, to use that excuse is just absolute nonsense. They should be ashamed for blaming the paramedics that they are not available. Paramedics in British Columbia are the most professional people. They have done their utmost. They're working longer hours. They're tired. There are no breaks. But still they are there to help anybody who needs help when they need help.

Now let's talk about what the real issue behind this legislation is. During the hearings at the labour relations board, during the cross-examinations of some of the documents, what we found out.... There was a memorandum sent by Dr. Mike Wilkinson, who's the director of medical services for VANOC, to Stephen Brown, Lee Doney and other government officials. That memorandum was.... In the hearing, the cross-examination, we found out, and I read in part:

"VANOC Medical Services...requires definitive confirmation by October 1, 2009, that all required ambulance services will be provided as planned. These services include the ability to engage the VPCs and BCAS members in full venue planning as soon as possible. This confirmation must also include a guarantee that no services during the games will be disrupted or reduced from what has been planned."

[1020]

It continues. It says:

"If we are unable to obtain the guarantee, through either settlement of the strike or legislated 'détente' for the games, then VANOC will be required to initiate alternative contingency plans to avoid cancellation of the games."

That's the real issue. H1N1 is just a cover; it's an excuse.

The reality is that VANOC is dictating what should be done. It's VANOC that's running this province, it seems. This minister and this government should be ashamed of what they have done yesterday through Bill 21.

It's important that British Columbians understand that when this minister stands up and other members of the government stand up and talk about, "We are trying to protect the members of the public, British Columbians, from H1N1," it's absolute crap. It's nonsense.

Deputy Speaker: Member, please withdraw that.

R. Chouhan: I withdraw that. Sorry, Madam Speaker. It's absolute nonsense what the government is trying to do.

The reality is now, as we have seen through this memo that we have discovered, that it's the Olympics. It's VANOC. They are the one who asked the government, and the

government here said: "You want us to jump? Tell us how high." It's that attitude.

It's ruining the collective bargaining process that we have had in this province for so long. Now the paramedics are in the process of completing their ratification vote, which is scheduled to be completed on November 5. Today is — what? — November 3, so two more days. Could they not wait for the outcome of that?

For the minister to stand up and say, "Oh, we cannot wait. That's not an option...." The members of the union would have accepted it. Who knows? On November 5, when the vote is completed, they would be counting it, and the results would have been announced to everybody. But for the minister to stand up and introduce this bill and say that that was not an option — that is absolutely embarrassing. They should be ashamed of what they have done.

First, the paramedics know their right to strike was taken away through the essential services order — basically virtually eliminated. And now, through Bill 21, we have seen an end to free collective bargaining for the members of this union. The government should stand up and apologize for what they have done.

They should stand up and admit that they have failed in negotiating a collective agreement. They have failed in appointing an arbitrator when the union asked it to be appointed months ago.

This heavy-handed approach that we have seen is not going to be helpful to anybody. Come next year, April 1, all the public sector unions are up in their negotiations. Their collective agreements are expiring, and they're up for renewal.

With this, the message the minister is sending through Bill 21 is that they don't care. They're inflaming the labour relations instead of repairing, as the minister was trying to claim yesterday. When you appoint an industrial inquiry commissioner, as suggested in Bill 21, there's nothing left to be repaired. The damage, the severe damage, has already been done. The IIC, whoever that person may be, would go and meet with the union and expect that they would cooperate.

The first and basic fundamental principle of free collective bargaining is respect and trust. This government doesn't care. They have already lost that respect and trust, and now they expect that somebody will go and have a magic wand and fix everything. It's not going to work like that.

[1025]

It only works when both parties are sincere in dealing with each other, trying to find a fair and equitable solution. Bill 21 is neither fair nor equitable. The terms proposed under Bill 21 are somewhat similar to what already is on the table for ratification.

If the government had waited two more days, they probably would have found out that the process had worked. Now it's up for failure. What we have in front

of us for the months and months ahead of us is that people — who are forced to work under Bill 21, rather than them going to work to do their job as they've always been doing — will always be thinking: "We are forced, and we are sent back to work by the Minister of Health and the B.C. Liberal government when we were already engaging in a meaningful process to conclude our negotiations."

What would they be thinking when they would be going to work and always...? On one hand, the union has done everything in their power to conclude the negotiations, but the government has totally neglected their plea to sit down and negotiate a free collective agreement.

The independent arbitrator that they were asking for could have dealt with all the outstanding issues such as staff recruitment, training, retention, employee compensation, staff workload, occupational health and safety issues, rural and remote deployment.

That in itself is a big issue, the deployment and the needs of people of British Columbia in the rural areas. We don't have enough paramedics and ambulances available in those areas. Rather than admitting that and engaging itself to find resources to help those people, they are now saying: "Oh well, we are in power. We are the government. We can do this. Therefore we are going to introduce Bill 21 and do the whole thing, and everything else will resolve."

It's not going to work like that. We have seen in the past that any action like this by the government has created more.... It has a negative impact on the labour relations. That's what we have seen in the past.

When the union first met with the employer, the very first day, the union made sure that they established that they came to the bargaining table with full sincerity, were there to resolve issues and find meaningful solutions. But what they have seen at the bargaining table day after day, if there was any bargaining ever happening, was stalling.

They met with lack of respect. There was no trust. Now Bill 21 has confirmed that this government does not care about the services of those paramedics, which they have been providing for the last many, many years. Many of them have seniority of over 20 years.

[1030]

They have been working hard, and we need them. We need to send them a message that we care, that we respect their work and that we trust them. They are the ones who go out and save lives. They are the ones who go out when somebody is injured. In crises, they are the first ones to go and help.

Rather than accepting that, rather than help finding a solution, rather than finding help for them, the government is now introducing Bill 21. It's an insult. As I mentioned earlier, when you inflame labour relations through legislation, it will take years and years to repair that.

You know, I have in my lifetime negotiated literally hundreds and hundreds of collective agreements. I was a director of collective bargaining for the Hospital Employees Union before I got into politics in 2005. The main reason for me to join politics was Bill 29. When Bill 29 was introduced, thousands upon thousands of women, single mothers and women of colour lost their jobs. Many of them had seniority — 18, 19 years of seniority. Families were ruined.

Before the election in 2001 the opposition leader at that time, the current Premier, came and met with the Hospital Employees Union and said that they respected collective bargaining and that they would not touch any collective agreement. That interview which was done was reported, and it was published in the union's newspaper, called the *Guardian*. Lo and behold, shortly thereafter when the election was over, the opposition leader became the Premier, and Bill 29 was introduced.

The same attitude continues today. Bill 29 privatized those services in the hospitals provided by experienced, skilled workers. When that happened, it not only destroyed those jobs, it also destroyed the care level provided to the seniors, the patients in the hospitals or in the long-term care facilities. When we're talking about protecting British Columbians' health, we have to make sure that we have workers who are skilled, who are experienced, and that we respect them.

Like Bill 29, Bill 21 has done the total opposite. The government is saying, "Forget it. Forget about all the skilled workers and all that. We know how to deal with it. We are going to introduce the legislation, and we're going to just put an end to everything," as under Bill 29.

The real reason for that at that time was not to save money. As we have seen through the Supreme Court decision, money was not saved. It was just simply to reward the B.C. Liberals' supporters. You know, those multinational corporations like Aramark, Sodexo and Compass came and took those jobs in the hospitals and long-term care facilities. Where was the saving? If a saving was made, the government should have shown that information to the public, but they are still hiding. That information was never shared.

Similarly, now under Bill 21, forcing the employees, the workers, the paramedics, to accept this proposal that the government is talking about is not going to help anybody.

[1035]

The proposal that was tabled on September 28 also included a bonus of \$4,100 for full-time employees and a bonus of \$2,600 for part-time employees. This government has taken that away. Are they trying to tell us that by taking that bonus away from 3,500 employees — the paramedics — they are going to save tons of money?

This government has a record of wasting millions and millions of dollars on extravagant parties that they're organizing for the upcoming Olympics. As we have

talked about in the past week and the past few days, they're spending, I think, millions of dollars — let's say, to be safe — just to please their supporters. They're buying 3,000 tickets to hand out to their rich friends, to their supporters, but they don't have a small amount of money for paramedics, for professionals who are there to save people's lives. It's shameful. It's shameful what this government has done.

Now, if the government is thinking that by introducing Bill 21 it would reduce the amount of response time that it takes.... Nothing is going to change. Nothing is going to change because the ambulance workers, the paramedics, are overworked. They don't have all the resources. They don't have all the equipment they need to respond quickly. So that situation is not going to change.

What will change is the relationship between the employer and employees. That relationship, that damaged relationship, is not going to help British Columbians for the months to come and when we get into bargaining as of March 1 next year. We will see, as I have seen in my lifetime, that when you don't have that respect and trust amongst parties, you suffer. Who suffers most in the hospital and the health care industry is the patients, the seniors, people who need help more than anybody else.

Will this government change its mind and withdraw this bill? I don't think so because their record shows that they don't care. They will continue on this destructive path. They will continue to damage the work done by these hard-working people.

You know, I have seen paramedics. When they go attend to somebody at a home or at the hospital or roadside when an accident occurs, I have seen these paramedics crying because they were unable to help at the time when they needed to. They wanted to save that life, but they couldn't do it.

That's the kind of care and compassion these people carry. Rather than saying, "Thank you very much for your work. Thank you very much for standing up for us. Thank you very much for coming out and taking care of my parents or my loved ones," we are saying: "Sorry, we don't care. We don't respect your work." That's shameful. It's just unacceptable the way they are treated by the B.C. Liberal government in B.C.

[1040]

This dispute, when it started — I'm trying to find the information here, if I can.... At that time, the union laid out all these issues. They put them on the table step by step, asking for the kinds of resources they need to address those issues.

This whole dispute was dragged on and on and on. The Minister of Health, the B.C. Liberal government — they were sleeping. They were ignoring their plea. They were just not responding to what the workers were asking for.

For months and months they sat there totally trying to wash their hands off. As a result, from what we have seen today, we have come to a point where workers had

to take a strike vote, and they had to go on strike. But as many of the health care workers are subject to, they had to go through essential services hearings, and they were ordered to provide and to maintain a very high level of services. There were hardly any paramedics off the job. As I said, this bill probably would have sent back an additional 16 paramedics — not even that.

What are they trying to do? They're trying to hide behind this excuse of H1N1. The government is not being truthful. They should stand up and admit that they're reacting to VANOC's demand that there should be no dispute, that there should be no lack of services — that when they need it, they should be there. As we have seen from Dr. Wilkinson's memorandum to this government, the reality is, as we have seen in the last many months, that the government is simply working around the needs and demands of VANOC, not around the needs of British Columbians.

It would be good. I think it would send a good message to British Columbians and to everybody if the Minister of Health stood up and said: "I'm sorry. The truth is that, yes, we are catering to VANOC's needs." It would send a really good message for the minister to stand up and say: "Sorry. We made a mistake." But no, this government has no shame. They don't care, and they'll continue on their destructive path.

Come next year, when we are starting our collective bargaining with thousands and thousands of other collective agreements, we will see the impact of Bill 21 on that.

I again ask. I know the minister is not going to change his mind, but there are other members of the B.C. Liberal government. They should listen to the plea of these workers.

L. Krog: I'd love to believe that the minister and this government might have been moved by the words of the member for Burnaby-Edmonds, someone who — as I pointed out in this chamber a few days ago — has spoken on behalf of working people his whole life, someone who has enormous experience in the collective bargaining process, someone who understands what it is for workers to suffer indignities in the workplace.

[1045]

I don't for a moment think this minister and this government are going to be moved. It has become increasingly clear throughout its mandate that the ideological divisions that exist in the province of British Columbia are going to continue to exist, because whenever the rights of labour versus the employer come into collision, this government will consistently side on behalf of the employer in the ideological belief that somehow unions are just this unnecessary cog, some brake on the pursuit of profit, some interference in the process by which most British Columbia employers and businesses operate.

The fact is that this bill is extremely short, but it is anything but sweet. As the member for Burnaby-Edmonds pointed

out so ably, what is absolutely unprecedented about this legislation is that it was introduced four days short of the conclusion of a voting process that is underway. Now, in this province, I won't say we're used to it and I won't say we've become — how shall I say? — insensitive to it, but we are used to this government interfering in collective bargaining, interfering in contractual relations in a way that, frankly, makes the old Socreds look like the working person's friend.

Bill 29 — what happened to the Hospital Employees Union, what happened to their workers — went all the way to the Supreme Court of Canada for this government to be told what most British Columbians already knew. That was: what it did was just wrong, plain wrong. It was anything but bargaining in good faith. It was anything but treating and showing respect for workers. It was anything but doing right, demonstrating trust and respect.

Here we are today again — another bill introduced before the vote is even counted. Now, I've got to give this government some credit. It takes an amazing amount of gall to do that. The last time I checked the legislative calendar, we're here until the 26th of November. There is more than enough time just in the existing legislative schedule, let alone a special sitting which governments sometimes call if they're trying to deal with an outstanding crisis or labour issue. There is more than enough time for this government to have introduced this legislation, if it really thought it was necessary, during the balance of this session.

But instead, it's almost like they have to just rub the noses of the paramedics of British Columbia in this dispute. They just have to give them one more whack, to stick them one more time and make a mockery of the collective bargaining process, to insult them, to just drive home to them the complete lack of respect for what it is they do.

You know, it was just on Friday that my sainted mother, 93 years old, was attended by the paramedics in Qualicum Beach at the facility she lives in. She's off in Nanaimo hospital, got good care, getting good care, got good care from the paramedics.

There is not one of us in this chamber who hasn't had a family member or a friend or perhaps even one of us who has benefited from the incredible work that these people who work as paramedics do for all of us day in and day out in British Columbia, every hour of every day 24-7, 365 days of the year.

I live in an older neighbourhood, in the sense that a number of the people who live near us are seniors. I can't tell you how many times they've had to attend in my neighbourhood. You hear that ambulance and you worry about who it is, but you know that the people who are coming are skilled. They care. They've taken on an occupation that is really more of a calling in most respects. They've taken on a calling to care for people in crisis. They're there when you're injured. They're there when you're sick. They're there when you're in need, and not everyone can do that.

Not everyone can deal with issues of blood and health. Not everyone is prepared in a situation of crisis to have the calm sense that you need in order to respond to that crisis. Not everyone has the courage to make the decisions that are necessary to determine what's wrong, what's required in order to preserve that life until you can get it to a hospital or indeed preserve that life — period. Not everyone has that, but the paramedics of British Columbia do, and they do it, as I've said, every hour of every day of the year.

If there was ever a group that deserved a fair bargaining process, it's this group. They're up there with the firefighters. They're up there with the police. They are services on which we all rely absolutely. We don't expect that when we get sick some neighbour is going to throw us in the back of our family car and drive us up to the hospital. That's not what we expect in British Columbia. We expect that a paramedic is going to be there — calm, rational, experienced and ready — to literally, in many cases, save our lives.

What we have before us today is a bill that imposes a settlement that — frankly, in light of the work they do, in the calling that is their profession — is pretty modest compensation.

They have been in this difficult position for months and months, knowing that, with the essential services requirements, their strike.... I won't call it a joke. I don't mean to demean it, but it's certainly not a very effective strike. They knew it. The people of British Columbia knew it.

The people of British Columbia have made it very, very clear where they stand on this issue. You can't drive through a neighbourhood in my city, in Nanaimo — rich or poor, regardless of ethnicity, regardless of income, regardless of the quality of housing — without seeing some signs supporting the paramedics in every neighbourhood in my constituency. I don't think the citizens of Nanaimo are any different than the other citizens of the province of British Columbia. They support the paramedics. They appreciate the work of the paramedics.

If this government is out to win the unpopularity contest, I must say that the introduction of this bill puts them right at the top of the list, the likely ones to win the unpopularity contest.

Turning on a group of workers who are in the midst of a voting process to determine whether they'll accept a collective agreement, turning on workers who are so bound by legislation and regulation that their strike really amounts to visiting public places and sticking up signs and picketing on occasion, and not even picketing in the traditional sense of stopping other workers from working.... To turn on workers like that, with this legislation, is a new low.

It's not as if I heard from the minister this morning any evidence that this was even required. Firstly, we don't know what the results of the vote are going to

be. Indeed, the paramedics — who every day take on this difficult work in our communities, in our neighbourhoods — may have decided to, in fact, accept the proposal. They may, in fact, have dealt with this issue already, but we don't know that.

In its impatience, in its lack of respect for working people and its lack of respect for the bargaining process, in its lack of respect for the work they do, this government has proceeded to bring in this bill, at this time, before we even know whether it's necessary.

In terms of whether it's necessary or not, I expected from the minister this morning some explanation as to why it had to be done now. Where was it? The minister himself said: "The structure is broken." Well, he's right about the bargaining structure from the point of view of the paramedics. It is broken. But if it's broken, by implication of the English language, it is something that might be fixable.

When you impose Bill 21 on the paramedics of this province, I suspect that what you've really done is not broken something that's capable of being repaired and restored and made whole again; you have literally finished collective bargaining for a very long time between the paramedics in this province and the ambulance service.

[1055]

We're not going to be able to go back unless this government has the courage and the wisdom to do what the member for Burnaby-Edmonds called on them to do this morning, and that is essentially withdraw from the field.

You know, in our magical view of chivalry in history, when you call a truce, the bad guys are the ones who break it. It's just not respectable behaviour. There was a vote underway. Did this government sit back, keep its mouth shut and keep its fingers out of the process?

An Hon. Member: Could it wait two more days?

L. Krog: Could it wait two more days, the member says. Two more days — 48 hours — could it wait? No. It had to bring in this legislation. It had to break the truce, if you will. It had to do the dishonourable thing. It couldn't possibly have waited a little while longer and let the process take its natural and lawful course. It couldn't wait.

The minister said the....

S. Cadieux: I request leave to make an introduction.

Leave granted.

Introductions by Members

S. Cadieux: It gives me pleasure to introduce 26 grade 11 students from Panorama Ridge Secondary who are here with their teacher, Mr. Darrell Fast, and a number of parents. I'd like to make them welcome.

Debate Continued

L. Krog: I'm delighted by that interruption, because it gives the students an opportunity to see democracy in action. It gives those students an opportunity to see where the rubber hits the road politically in British Columbia and where this side of the House differs from that side of the House, because there is no bill we are likely to have seen this session that I think more clearly demonstrates the differences between the government's view of the work that paramedics do and the right to organize unions and the right to free collective bargaining and the attitude of this side of the House, the opposition.

I come back to what I was saying. The minister says the structure is broken. He's right. But the minister also said that right now there were no adverse outcomes to date, but they had to move in before something happened. Well, I have news for the minister. It may come as a great surprise to the government, but the union went on strike on April 1, 2009. They've been on strike for months. For months.

As for H1N1, I'm not discounting the importance to British Columbians to ensure they don't get sick, but I haven't heard or seen any evidence that demonstrates that the public of British Columbia, notwithstanding that these poor paramedics have been on strike since April 1.... I've not seen any evidence that warrants this extraordinary insult to the bargaining process, this extraordinary interruption to the bargaining process, this extraordinary interruption to the voting process.

If you're going to bring in what essentially amounts to emergency legislation, if you're going to compel the imposition of a contract in a labour relations matter, it's not unreasonable to expect that there is good evidence to warrant that.

[L. Reid in the chair.]

Governments don't pass these kinds of bills in the ordinary course of events. The collective bargaining process works because parties are generally satisfied and acknowledge and know that they are expected to resolve their differences themselves. This is not the place to resolve labour relations issues, and when it is, it should be in extraordinary circumstances.

So from this government, so far today — and I've only had the pleasure of hearing the minister speak — I haven't heard one bit of evidence to demonstrate why we are here in this chamber this morning debating this bill, why it needs to be imposed on the paramedics — of all the groups in British Columbia that might have an impact on the Olympics, that might have an impact on the daily lives of British Columbians — why it is we have to impose this deal.

[1100]

You know, there's a line in the Bible: "He that troubleth his own house shall inherit the wind." Well, I'm not sure what the legacy will be of this interruption with the paramedics, but I'm fairly satisfied that it's not going to be an improvement in labour relations. It is not going to be seen by the workers of British Columbia as an olive branch from a government that is historically viewed as the spokesperson for big business and nobody else.

I don't think the workers in this province making the \$6-an-hour training wage and those that benefit with at least the \$8 an hour, if they've managed to get through the training period, are going to look at this legislation and say: "Boy, that Liberal government — they're on our side. They really care about working people." I don't think that's the signal when you see them imposing this on the paramedics of British Columbia.

The fact is that no matter how you slice it and dice it and cut it up and examine it and analyze it, we are back to the most basic division in B.C. politics: the B.C. government opposed to workers. It's pure and simple.

I know there has been some criticism of the position the union took during the course of negotiations. I accept that in any negotiation, there are two sides. There are two sets of opinions. Not everyone is perfect. Not everyone is always right. Sometimes you look back, and maybe you should have taken something when it was offered instead of resisting.

But all of that negotiating history, whatever issues may arise from that, does not justify what is happening here today. It does not justify it, and it provides no excuse for this government.

The minister said that we appreciate the work they do. I don't doubt for a moment the sincerity of this government. You know what? When you're lying on the floor of your kitchen with your heart attack, every British Columbian appreciates the work that paramedics do. Every one of us can imagine that situation.

Many of us went to the Heart and Stroke Foundation breakfast this morning. We were reminded of the statistics around health, around heart attacks and strokes and coronary problems. We understand all of that. The message was driven home very effectively this morning.

When the minister said that they appreciate the work they do... Yes, we do. But sometimes thanks isn't enough. Sometimes when you're working on call for that miserable pittance, when you're going out to your fifth or sixth car accident of the day, when you're seeing people in the last moments of their life as you're trying to save their life, it's not such a bad thing to actually pay some decent wages to the people who do that work.

I suspect that the majority of members of this chamber wouldn't have the intestinal fortitude or the physical courage or the mental stamina or the ability to be of any use in those kinds of situations. The best that most of us might be would be standing by, hoping and praying that the outcome was positive.

But the people who are paramedics do this all the time. They continue to do it because, it's pretty clear to me — as one of the women who is quoted in some of the material I've got in front of me, about her husband — they love it. They understand how fundamentally important it is.

It's like people who volunteer for the armed services. You hope and pray you never have to use the skills you learn. You hope and pray you're never placed in a situation of danger or peril, but the reality is that the moment you volunteer and sign up, you know that's exactly where you may end up.

Everyone who signs up to be a paramedic, who undertakes that as a career path, knows what they're getting into. They are putting themselves in some of the most awful circumstances that people ever face in their lives, moments of peril and stress and fear, and they do it day in and day out. It takes a special person.

[1105]

What's the message — and I come back to it — when the minister says on one hand that we appreciate the work they do and then introduces into this chamber legislation that forces them to accept a contract when we're not even finished the voting process?

One of the members over here, the member for Burnaby-Edmonds, said it's hypocrisy. That's probably the kindest language one could possibly use in this chamber without receiving censure from the Chair.

It is hypocrisy. It is absolute hypocrisy to suggest for a moment that you, on one hand, appreciate the work that the paramedics of British Columbia do and then turn around and bring this legislation in during the course of the voting process. Actions do speak louder than words. I suspect that some British Columbians — cynical British Columbians and even not so cynical British Columbians — somehow think this has something to do with the Olympics.

At a time when we are trying to appeal to the best in our society and encourage the great spirit of international competition and fair play, when we're trying to encourage people who want to do their best and go for the gold, when we're trying to appeal to the best side of British Columbians, there are many amongst us now who are beginning to think that this government — whether it's in this bill imposing a contract on their paramedics so there will be no disruption, whether it's in the signage issues in Vancouver, whether it's in the priorities of government spending, whether it's in forcing people into homeless shelters who may not want to go...

There are some who cynically may believe that this is about whitewashing British Columbia, about putting on the best face possible for the Olympics, instead of rejoicing in a province where dissent is possible, where criticism of government is not a crime and where the collective bargaining process — except in very extraordinary circumstances — is respected and honoured by those who

participate in it and by the government whose privilege it is to serve the people of British Columbia.

It is about good labour relations practice. It's pretty clear that that isn't this government's long suit. They bring in a bill that will poison for years the relationship between an employer and the people who, in a crisis, we will turn to — and if not us, our friends, our neighbours, our family, the tourists who come to the province of British Columbia, visitors. We're going to poison the relationship with those workers, and for what reason?

As I said earlier, I haven't heard anything from this government that demonstrates to me why we're doing this. Is it to show that the government has a majority, that they can impose their will on people, that they can stamp out those pesky unions whenever they feel like it? Is it to send a signal that "We're in charge"?

As I said earlier, I don't think it's about a popularity contest, because if there is one thing that the majority of British Columbians agree upon.... They wanted to see a fair agreement for the paramedics. They wanted to see the right thing done, particularly because we are acknowledging in this chamber day after day, through various speeches and legislation and regulation, that we are an aging population where the likelihood of you requiring the services of a paramedic is growing, not diminishing.

In my own community the percentage increase from 2002 to 2009.... In north Nanaimo it's 40.87 percent, and in south Nanaimo it's 37.71 percent. In credit to the paramedics in my community, in south Nanaimo those calls are reached within less than nine minutes 69.84 percent of the time, and 53.19 percent of the time in north Nanaimo.

[1110]

In other words, when the crisis is there, in the majority of cases in my community, you know that you're going to get served by a paramedic in less than nine minutes after the call is made. That's pretty extraordinary.

These are extraordinary people. They're doing their best. I would have hoped that this government would have wanted to do right by them. I would have hoped that this government wouldn't have wanted to essentially blame CUPE for taking a tough approach in their bargaining, because, as I've said, these people have such limited tools in order to try and force a decent settlement.

They are so bound by regulation. For them to succeed in getting fair compensation, fair treatment, respect in the workplace, compensation for the on-call time.... Their ability to do so is so incredibly limited.

It's not as if the solution for this wasn't clear. The government could have imposed an industrial inquiry commission months ago. All through the campaign, I doubt there was a member elected here, if they bothered to attend all-candidates meetings.... In my constituency they didn't attend all the all-candidates meetings all of the time, but if they did, they would have heard the

questions from the floor. They would have seen the paramedics there.

They would have read the editorials in the paper. They would have paid attention to the news. If they'd knocked on people's doors and asked about these issues, they would have heard the same answer: "Solve it. Deal with these people fairly. Get this strike settled. Show respect for these particular workers." That was the message from British Columbians, and it was clear as a bell. It's still clear as a bell.

Yet here we are, a couple of days shy of hearing the vote results, imposing a deal on the workers. Now, the minister says: "Oh well, you know, it's only until March 31, 2010." If it's only until then, why are we here, for starters? But more importantly, if we haven't heard the vote, why are we here? And if we really respect these people, if we really appreciate the work they do — "appreciate the work they do," the minister's language — how are we demonstrating that by doing this?

It is absolutely clear, I think, that this government, no matter how hard it tries, no matter how much effort it makes to try and spin themselves as different than that hard-hearted group after the 2001 election who cut up the HEU contract, who punished the workers of this province.... No matter how hard they try, here we are again, November of 2009, eight-plus years into their mandate, doing the same old thing.

When push comes to shove, this government does not respect the workers of British Columbia, and if there was ever a group of workers in British Columbia who deserved more respect than those who go out and try and save our lives, I'm hard-pressed today to think of a group — hard-pressed.

I'm going to conclude with the same plea made by the member for Burnaby-Edmonds, who spoke so eloquently earlier. It's not too late. It's okay to say you're sorry. It's okay to acknowledge this was a mishandled mess from the start by this government. It's okay to step back and withdraw this bill. It's okay to let the collective bargaining process proceed. It's okay to impose an industrial inquiry commissioner without legislation. It's okay just to do the right thing for once for workers in British Columbia. It's okay to acknowledge that this government is and has been wrong.

B. Routley: The point has been made about the importance of the work of paramedics. I want to put a face on the paramedics' work.

[1115]

Years ago, back in the 1980s, I was working in the forest industry at the Youbou mill, and I had a good buddy — his name is Mike Barry — who was laid off in the first round of layoffs due to technological change. The veneer plant was shutting down, and they brought in a new system that put people out of work, literally hundreds of people out of work. Mike Barry was the most junior

first-aid man at the plant, and he was laid off.

His family and our family were good friends. We had kids — had that in common — to play with each other and that kind of thing. When Mike decided he was going to train to work for the B.C. Ambulance Service....

One of the things that I did every day.... I know it's going to be hard to look at me today and imagine that I was a picture of health back in the 1985 era, but back in those days I actually used to run with my friend Mike Barry. The reason that I got up every morning and ran was because my friend Mike Barry was training for the B.C. Ambulance Service because he had lost his job in the forest industry, like so many thousands of others have lost their jobs in British Columbia, and was looking for a new career opportunity.

He was the kind of guy that cared about the health and safety of other people, that was interested in saving lives, in learning all of the intricacies of that kind of field — and there's a lot to it. You don't just become a paramedic overnight. There is a whole lot of training and going off to the Justice Institute and all of the skills that go into learning how to save lives.

I think back to those days where we got up every morning, morning after morning, and ran, and then him going off to take his training. I was real proud of my friend Mike going over there and getting his training completed and coming back, and I remember him showing up in that brand-new uniform, working for the B.C. Ambulance Service when he first got a job.

He got all of the crappy jobs to start with. They send you over to Vancouver right away, and you're put right into some of the most difficult situations you can imagine. I recall talking to my friend Mike about, you know: "What's it like to put your life at risk, to go and deal with people that are infected with — whether it's AIDS or any other — all of the different variety of diseases?"

I said: "Don't you ever think about what you're doing, putting your own life and maybe your family at risk?" And he said: "Bill, I love it. I love doing my job, because I'm there where the action is. I'm there helping to save lives and helping to make a difference." That's the kind of people that we've got throughout British Columbia. These people aren't some kind of rabble-rousers.

I don't mind telling you that I might be one of those rabble-rousers, because when I was a young fella, I remember I started off in a non-union situation, and I found out that when an employer abuses people, they soon get an attitude about the place they work. I had such an employer when I first worked in a shoe repair business years ago, and I saw workers mistreated and literally abused — the way they were verbally harassed as well as in other ways.

It was totally unacceptable, the way those workers were treated — literally, workers stolen from. You know, it gives you an attitude at a young age about employers. There ought to be basic fairness in the workplace.

There are good employers, I might add. I'm glad that in my lifetime I've had the opportunity to meet real good employers. You know what they have in common? I've done a little bit of a study on it, because I care about employment and the workplace and spent my life in those kinds of areas.

[1120]

I find that one of the number one things that an employer must have is respect. It is at the core of every relationship, whether it's the marriage relationship, whether it's a relationship with friends or family. It is at the core of relationships with the workplace. That's having the respect to understand what it is the other person is doing, to essentially walk a mile in the other person's shoes.

I suggest to you that the government on the other side just doesn't get it, when they could.... In the last couple of years I've watched the spectacle of this government while the Premier was off to Beijing. He was off to Beijing, and on a Friday night they announced the 53 percent wage increase for the Premier and anywhere from a 35 percent to 43 percent wage increase for bureaucrats and ministers.

Did anybody forget about that? Well, I'm here to tell you that I didn't forget about that. The people of British Columbia haven't forgotten about it, and you can be sure the paramedics haven't forgotten about it.

Now, if you're going to show leadership and treat people with respect, don't you think that one of the first things you ought to do is lead? Real leadership would be if that government would have taken a 3 percent increase. Then I could understand the minister standing up here and saying: "Well, it's kind of like what other people are going to get, a 3 percent increase."

I understand difficult times. I know that there are forest workers that have taken concessions to hold their jobs. They've given things up. I've been part of that, by the way. In my history, I've known, as a union leader, that when things are tough, you have to sometimes buckle up and take a back seat to what's going on, because you can't wring money out of a dead horse, so to speak; it's got to be a business that's making real opportunities. You've got to have a business model that works.

When you think about what these paramedics are doing every day.... Let's talk about that. Again, my friend Mike Barry, when he was out on a scene of an accident where little children were injured.... I don't want to get too graphic, but I'll tell you it was an awful, awful scene that he came across, and I saw that man reach down and hug his little kids. I think any of us in this House would be reaching down.

If we had been out on that accident scene and seen the kind of things that these folks see every day.... They come home, and they give their children an extra hug when they have been involved in one of those kinds of horrific situations where children are involved.

Just think about the idea that you're going to be on standby for two bucks an hour. I want you to think, hon. Speaker, about what it would be like in the middle of the night with your two bucks an hour to suddenly have that buzzer ring off. You're going to leap out of bed, race for the door, jam those car keys in, race off to the ambulance service, jump in that truck and turn on the light and all of the sirens and head out because you know you've got a job.

You know what that job is, hon. Speaker? It's not to go and fix tires — no. It's not to do some political deal. It's to save lives. These people are trained to go to a crisis, and this government....

[1125]

You know, I am at a loss for words. I could not believe when I heard that this government, while they're in the middle of a voting process.... It's laughable because it's so unbelievable that a government.... They're making history again. Once again, while they're voting, the people....

They actually sat down and bargained, and even though it was hard bargaining — and they didn't give them, certainly, what they were looking for, the workers were voting on a package. While they're voting on the package, this government comes in with heavy-handed, mean-spirited legislation and is trying to cram it down the throats of people that are literally out there, day in and day out, saving lives.

You know, I think about that, and I go: "What is going on in the province of British Columbia? What new low could we possibly stoop to?" But to find ourselves in a position where a government totally ignores not only one of the basic democratic principles — the rights for unions to exist in the first place, to organize themselves, to go into free collective bargaining, as it's called, and to negotiate....

You know, I could understand.... First of all, the government has got this essential services legislation. I hear from CUPE that the only folks that weren't essential.... There are something like 16 people who weren't essential. Everybody else is so essential that they've got to be ordered back to work. But this government has come up with a new plan because there are these 16 terrible people out there that they think are messing things up.

I believe in my heart of hearts that this is more about the Olympics. I mean, to claim it's some pandemic, that they've got some urgent need.... They're going to work every day. The ambulances are out there. They care too much, hon. Speaker.

Those ambulance drivers and paramedics care too much about the people of British Columbia to abandon them. That is not happening, and this speaker himself admitted to that. He talks about a bunch of parked trucks. Well, what kind of emergency is that? That's not an emergency.

We're talking about a handful of people. For this government to decide to bring down the heavy hammer and

force a collective agreement on a group of individuals when.... What are the alternatives? Well, the alternatives are to do what the union really asked for at the end of the day. That's final and binding mediation-arbitration.

I want to talk about that for a minute. I remember a time back years ago when this government brought in binding mediation-arbitration on the union that I was involved in at the time, the forest workers. I can remember being very upset about binding arbitration, because it takes away your democratic rights at the end of the day. You're going to have a third party come up with a decision and tell you what your collective agreement is.

That's not entirely respectful, but it's at least a better option than the actual boss.... And think about that in this day and age. The boss is the government. They're sitting down in bargaining. Can you imagine the government's own negotiator getting instructions from whomever in government they choose to determine what the boundaries are going to be for a deal?

The boss says: "Well, you know, we think that 3 percent will be okay." Then the boss says: "Well, you know, maybe we'll sweeten it up with 4,100 bucks." But now the government comes in. They even are so mean-spirited that they would take away the 4,100 bucks. What is that about?

That kind of treatment is just ensuring that they're setting the stage for a climate of mistrust of this government, as if that didn't already exist with what's happened with Bill 29 — you know, this government ripping up the collective agreement. It took the Supreme Court of British Columbia to tell this government that you can't mistreat employees.

[1130]

Did they learn anything from that example? Not a thing apparently — nothing. Didn't learn from their running off to the courts and being told by the Supreme Court that, no, you can't just rip up a collective agreement by enacting legislation. Talk about a bully boss being the government of British Columbia is a frightening prospect.

There is no crisis that this minister can talk about. You know, I look at some of the stories that I've read, and I want to just point to a few. On February 21, 2009, a woman collapsed at an event in Invermere. The 911 call was picked up by the Kelowna dispatch which was then transferred to the Kamloops call centre of the B.C. Ambulance Service, which in turn then contacted the Invermere unit.

According to observers, the minimum wait time was 30 minutes for an ambulance. The local councillor, Bob Campsall, said that they could have had her to the hospital within a few minutes. The woman was eventually confirmed to have had a stroke. She was taken to the Invermere and District Hospital before being transferred to Calgary. There's an example of where this government has failed to listen to the ambulance workers on the totality of this crisis.

Now, do you think a bunch of people who spend their lives focused on how to save the lives of other people woke up one morning and said: "You know what? We've got nothing else to do. Let's go and strike the government and ask for a big fat raise"? No, that's not what happened.

What happened was they were looking at a number of issues of disrespect, and let me go through the list that they want an industrial inquiry commissioner to have a look at, the kind of things that these scary unionists that somehow need to be crushed by government action.... Oh boy, the government thinks we've got to order them back to work right away. There's some huge, big crisis.

None of us has quite figured out what crisis they're talking about, when essential services are out there every day. You see their ambulances everywhere, and they're on the job. There are supposedly 16 people that are non-essential that are off the job, and this minister wants the public to believe there's some big panic to order these 16 people back to work. Boy, they must be pretty important indeed. I had no idea that 16 people could be so important.

But back to the issues that they want the industrial inquiry commissioner to look into — issues of staff recruitment, training and retention. Well, there's a list. Staff recruitment, training and retention. Retention is one of the issues I heard about. I talked to some of the paramedics, and they said a lot of the fellows are getting burned out. The amount of hours that they're required to be available on the job.... There's more and more and more stress and pressure on these paramedics all the time.

Again, walk a mile in their shoes. Think about sitting at home where you can't go to an event. You can't wander off outside of the range that they give you. You've got to be within a certain call area, and you can't just go on vacation and wander off fishing with your buddies somewhere. You've got to sit by the phone and be available. That's the kind of service that they give. They're available, and when that buzzer goes, they're off. They're off like a shot to give the people of B.C. the kind of service that they expect.

They want to talk about staff workload and occupational health and safety issues. You know, one of the things I heard a lot from ambulance and then paramedics was about health and safety issues.

[1135]

Just imagine yourself: you're out there on the job, and even if you're in the greatest of physical condition, those paramedics age just like the rest of us. Suddenly they find themselves in a situation where they've got to pack somebody 12 storeys down some set of stairs — or even if it's three to six storeys down a set of stairs, and there are two of you. The person at the heavy end of that is going to be really having a tough time. They suffer a lot of strains, soft tissue issues, those kinds of repetitive strain type of injuries, back injuries and that kind of thing. That's a fact of life.

They're not taking time off just to have fun, hon. Speaker. You may want to suggest that to the minister when he's available. They're not just taking days off for something to do. They care about their jobs. They care about the people of British Columbia, and they spend hundreds of hours training to take care of people, to deal with somebody that's stopped breathing, somebody that's bleeding all over the highway. They're there taking steps immediately.

They get out of that ambulance, and they go right to work. They don't hesitate. They're not thinking about any labour action. It's an absolute myth if anybody thinks that any of these paramedics spends any of their waking moments doing anything other than being prepared to do their job because they are committed to lives. Just like nurses and doctors are committed to saving lives, those paramedics are there committed to saving lives.

They want to talk about rural and remote deployment issues, and I want to talk about an example of that. In Chemainus and Port Renfrew, each of those areas is staffed by people who live outside of the community and commute to their shifts. Port Renfrew has only one ambulance, and Chemainus has two. Port Renfrew, because it cannot supply the necessary trained attendants, is dependent upon commuters. As a result, they're staffed primarily by people living in Victoria. Think about that — people living in Victoria heading out to Renfrew to staff their ambulance.

Imagine if you were living in the remote community of Port Renfrew, you were having a heart attack, and you're waiting for somebody to come out from Victoria to show up. One of the paramedics makes this comment. He says that as a result, it's staffed by people who drive up to two hours to get here from Victoria, depending on weather conditions. Chemainus is also an area dependent on commuters, and 60 to 70 hours a week that they're on call is not unheard of.

In the words of one part-time paramedic: "Would any of us work 70 hours a week and not be a bit grumpy about only being paid for maybe 30 of them?" So they're paid 30 hours, and they're on call and ready to go to work for up to 70 of them. That's the kind of commitment that these paramedics have to their job.

Again, think about what it would be like if you were that paramedic, and you get a call out in Port Renfrew. You get the buzzer here, and you're on the road, and you're heading to Port Renfrew. I wonder what that's like, thinking about what they're going to find at the end of the road, you know. Are they observing all of the speed limits?

You have to think about the fact that they're trained to save lives. They're there caring about getting to the job to save people's lives. They've seen what's happened with other critical services like firefighters and police. Why is it okay for firefighters and police? If they get into a dispute, often it's binding mediation-arbitration. That's the result. That is at least a third party.

[1140]

Bringing a third party in at least gives some dignity to the process. At least the union can go with their members and plead with a third party and say: "Look, here's the injustice. Here's why we think that we ought to have this kind of agreement. Here are the kinds of working conditions that other people, whether it's across Canada or certainly in other jurisdictions and other fields that are similar, are getting." I would like to draw that third party's attention to those kinds of conditions and try to make the argument that there ought to be parity with some of those positions.

I ask you to think about.... If you're a firefighter or a policeman or policewoman and you take essentially the same amount of training, the same number of years of training.... Sure, there are different occupations, but you look at these ambulance workers, who are comparing themselves to those roles and saying, "We're falling way behind...."

I'm not saying that the kind of increase that they asked for is necessarily justifiable in the middle of a difficult time like this. Obviously, prudence is something that has to be looked at, and that's something that a third-party mediator-arbitrator would look at.

A third party being brought into the process would have brought some dignity and some fairness to the table because it would have allowed all of the players to come to the table. The government side would have presented its terms and conditions on why it believes that at this time it was critical to look at some kind of prudence. At the same time, the union could have come forward and laid out why they were basically fair — the kinds of wages and all of the conditions.

It's often not just wages. I don't know too many union people that will have a prolonged and protracted strike only about wages. It's often about working conditions. When I talk to the paramedics about the lack of additional help for what they're going through — the lack of retention and training and that they needed to have a whole lot more paramedics....

You look at what is happening with the baby boomer problem. Just like any other skill set in the province of British Columbia.... Whether they're a teacher, a lawyer, a doctor — whatever it is that they are — they're aging. Over the next number of years there are going to be a lot of paramedics also leaving the workforce, and they can see those kinds of things coming.

The one thing that you have to have is conditions where people feel respected — that they have the most up-to-date equipment, that all of their vehicles have all of the necessary life-saving apparatus up-to-date and maintained well and available. To rely on a system where people are driving miles and miles to remote communities, I don't think.... You know, a lot of the people of British Columbia assume that they can just ring the phone and there's going to be somebody there. The facts are that that's not so.

Depending on your location and where you're going to be, the wait time gets longer and longer in remote communities. That is a clear factor that is concerning to the paramedics — that kind of issue. They want to see attention paid, and they want a full inquiry to examine service throughout British Columbia. Why should taxpayers in Renfrew be treated different than taxpayers anywhere else?

I can recall, when I was a school trustee, the government of the day arguing that a remote area that had a pulp mill shouldn't have the benefit of all of those industrial tax dollars going to that small community. They needed to be spread amongst the large urban centres. Well, if that's true, then the obvious truth is that the remote communities ought to be provided with that same respect.

[1145]

D. Routley: It's unfortunate to have to rise to speak to the Ambulance Services Collective Agreement Act, which by itself is a bit of an Orwellian twist of language — isn't it?

We are asked to debate a bill intitled the Ambulance Services Collective Agreement Act. It might better be described as "The collective failure to reach an agreement act." "The government's failure to respect its ambulance workers and give them an agreement that they could live with, that they could support their families on" — that, I think, would be a more appropriate title for this bill. Or it's "The government's abject subjugation to VANOC's whim" bill, because clearly, this bill is not being driven out of the public interest of British Columbians.

If the government had been operating with that imperative, then surely back in March, when the ambulance paramedics requested arbitration, they would have granted that, because they would have, I am sure, been confident that an independent arbitrator could have reached a settlement that would have honoured the interests of the ambulance paramedics but also protected the interests of British Columbians.

They failed to do that. They dragged their feet for months and months, and all the while the ambulance paramedics pleaded with the government and pleaded with British Columbians that their issues needed to be addressed.

When we see the ambulances go by with On Strike decals, we are reminded that they have issues related to the conditions of their employment, but we're never reminded by any lack of service. We're never reminded by any failure to appear at an accident scene with the timeliness that we've become accustomed to, because they're dedicated people. They're operating under an essential service order to maintain 100 percent pre-hospital service, which allows, as the previous speaker says, only 16 members not to be declared essential service. Essentially, they have no tools to bring their grievance to the government other than process, and now that process has been so aggrieved by this bill.

The minister claimed to value what our ambulance paramedics do. People in British Columbia value ambulance paramedics. How many times have we all heard people say: "Oh my God, I couldn't be an ambulance paramedic." The devotion to duty it must take for them to function, for them to deliver the service they do when they have to encounter the scenes that they do. It's an unbelievably valuable service that we should never insult and never disrespect the way this government is in bringing this bill forward at this time.

This bill is undermining the most basic principle of free collective bargaining, and that is respect and trust. How can we expect the ambulance paramedics to trust this government? How can we expect them to trust this government when in four days their ballots will be counted? Those are mail-in ballots, so most of them have already been cast.

This is an unprecedented tampering, interference and interruption of the free collective bargaining process. Never before in Canada has a government acted in the middle of a vote to force back-to-work legislation. This is a bully tactic by a government that has become accustomed to pushing the people of B.C. around.

Bill 29 — the Supreme Court rules it to be unlawful. That's the labour history of this government, and they're applying the same kind of principles to this bill.

Our ambulance paramedics face, daily, a carnage on our streets that we can only imagine. So many of them face a life beset by the problems of post-traumatic stress disorder from what they witness, so eloquently referred to by the previous speaker — children injured and dying; bloody, horrific highway carnage.

[1150]

[Mr. Speaker in the chair.]

This government's treatment of its citizens has forced our streets into the hellishness that we see, has converted our ambulance drivers, in fact, into being social workers and mental health workers — police officers, in a sense. They're alcohol and drug workers. They're doctors. They are required to administer a level of care and an understanding of people that is only acquired through years and years of training, and the human sensitivity it takes for them to care for British Columbians in these circumstances is something that isn't learned in a classroom. It's learned in those scenes by people who care.

Now they're being treated by a government that doesn't care, that doesn't care to pay our ambulance paramedics the same respect that every British Columbian pays them. Every British Columbian recognizes the devotion and the sacrifice that they make for their work.

They spend an average of five years in part-time work, paying for their training out of their own pockets. It takes five years for them to be able to apply for full-time work, on average, and during that time, they're on call,

often at \$2 an hour. This isn't just an on call, where you might be required to show up in a few hours for a shift that somebody didn't make. This is instantaneous, on-call readiness to face the kind of trauma that does result in post-traumatic stress disorder and all sorts of sacrifice of spirit.

There is a recruitment and retention problem, but 67 full-time paramedics were hired in 2008 in Vancouver — none this year. This government has created a shortage. This government has created a shortage by refusing to hire and refusing to train and refusing to pay ambulance paramedics a decent living wage. That is what has created a shortage.

There's no shortage of goodwill in the people of B.C. and the people ready to step up to answer that call. The shortage of goodwill is on that side of the House, and it's represented in this bill. It's a continuation of the failure to honour faith that this government has demonstrated to workers of this province for the last seven years, and it's atrocious.

They also face the minister's empty words of consideration that are matched by a reality of action that is an absolute confirmation that they are disrespected. Every time they brought concerns with the structure of their collective agreement to their employer, they were referred to the bargaining table. Look what happened when they went to the bargaining table.

They, in fact, assembled a template to address some of the systematic problems. Does this bill include any of those provisions? No. This bill simply forces them off their strike action and, in my cynical view, answers the call of VANOC, which knows that volunteer ambulance paramedics around this country have refused to answer the call to volunteer for the Olympics for fear of crossing a picket line. Underneath this bill, that's what's in action here.

The Ambulance Services Collective Agreement Act — four days before a vote. Unprecedented in the history of Canadian labour relations. Why now? Why now, after months and months of dragging their feet, does this government act this way? Is it throwing down a gauntlet to the rest of the public service?

We heard that in the minister's opening remarks. He said that this is what other public service workers can expect. This level of disrespect, this bully tactic — is that what they can expect?

They could have appointed an independent arbitrator. They should have appointed an independent arbitrator. They were begged during the election to appoint an independent arbitrator. If their interest was truly in addressing the concerns of the system, it was all there for them to do. But they didn't until now when they bring forward this bill. This essential service order has protected the public, but it has also removed any tools of the ambulance paramedics to bring their grievance to government, other than putting decals on their ambulances.

[1155]

On Tuesday of last week the LRB decision was used to force three ambulances to do practice runs at an Olympic venue, and those ambulances were staffed at premium rates. On Halloween night there was one ambulance in Ladysmith, none in Chemainus and none in Crofton. There was one advanced-care paramedic ambulance on the south side of Nanaimo and one ambulance on the north side.

So between the big city of Nanaimo, the north side, all the way to Duncan — that includes Ladysmith, Chemainus, Crofton and all the communities in between Ladysmith and Nanaimo: Cedar, Cedar by the Sea — there were three ambulances.

Mr. Speaker, noting the hour, I move adjournment of the debate and reserve my right to speak again.

D. Routley moved adjournment of debate.

Motion approved.

Committee of Supply (Section A), having reported resolution, was granted leave to sit again.

Hon. B. Penner 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.

PROCEEDINGS IN THE DOUGLAS FIR ROOM

Committee of Supply

ESTIMATES: MINISTRY OF
COMMUNITY AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT
(*continued*)

The House in Committee of Supply (Section A); H. Bloy in the chair.

The committee met at 10:06 a.m.

On Vote 22: ministry operations, \$176,775,000 (*continued*).

S. Fraser: Hello again to the minister and his staff. I'm just trying to pick up where we left off yesterday.

We were talking about infrastructure stimulus funds, and we had established that there was \$520 million available from the federal government for those funds. I just want to say that that was a difficult number to achieve. I know

the UBCM had to try to calculate it, and neither the federal or provincial authorities seemed to come up with that exact number — what B.C. was eligible for. So I'm glad we've established that. I think there are others in the province that wanted that number confirmed.

Of those dollars, there was a question about the provincial portion, the matching funds — whether or not the money would be categorized as out of operational or capital funding. I know that was an issue. I know the government took that position, and it was one of the reasons given for sort of being late out of the gate and accessing the federal funding.

Can the minister let us know how that turned out? Did the provincial funds...? Was that ever reconciled? Was it operational or capital funding or some combination of both?

Hon. B. Bennett: First, I would just remind the member again that there were many, many projects announced in April of 2009, and so I think it's inaccurate to suggest that the infrastructure program was somehow or other delayed or late.

With respect to the specifics of the member's question about the characterization of dollars that are going into these projects, I think the easiest way for the member to think about this is to just say to himself that all community-based infrastructure projects are funded with operating dollars from the province and all infrastructure projects that the province owns, like highways and things like that, are funded with capital dollars.

That is, I think, the easiest, clearest way to understand that division. All of the community-based infrastructure projects have now, essentially, been announced.

S. Fraser: Thanks to the minister for that. At the time of the UBCM, which was just September, of course, the UBCM raised concerns that the money was not hitting the ground fast compared to the rest of Canada, that we were in last place.

[1010]

I know that there are different pockets of money. There's the Building Canada fund and all that, but I'm talking about the infrastructure stimulus funds. That's the \$520 million federal funding that we would potentially match and then, of course, the municipal governments would also match — so a significant stimulus package.

At the time of the UBCM I know that by UBCM calculations, only 25 percent of that money had hit the ground, even though it had been earmarked as being fast-tracked by the Premier. That's why I was accurately stating that there was a problem in the province, and it seemed to be around how the money was going to be determined — the provincial portion of that money — whether it was operation or capital funding.

The minister has explained a piece of the question. Was this dilemma unique in British Columbia — whether

or not the provincial matching funding was going to be operational or capital? Because the other provinces didn't seem to have the same stall that we had in accessing that federal money and getting those shovel-ready projects underway in a timely manner.

Hon. B. Bennett: The member continues to refer back to the time prior to the infrastructure announcements made on September 24, 2009, just before UBCM, and the member continues to quote people from the UBCM making comments prior to when all of these infrastructure programs or projects were announced.

If the member would care to take the time to either talk directly to the executive director of UBCM or the president of UBCM, what the member would find is that communities in this province are extremely grateful and extremely pleased with the infrastructure projects that have been announced.

All of the money has been matched. We've got literally dozens and dozens and dozens of great infrastructure projects for communities that have been announced, and I would hope that the member will catch up to the reality and not continue to talk about, you know, something that hasn't been reality for at least a couple months.

In terms of whether other provinces worry about the difference between capital dollars and operating dollars, perhaps they don't worry as much as British Columbia does about fiscal matters like that.

If you take a look at the province of Alberta, which is always held up as this fiscal fortress of success, they've got an \$8 billion deficit. Take a look at the province of Ontario. They have a deficit in the order of \$20 billion to \$25 billion.

We don't operate that way in British Columbia. We're going to have at the most a \$2.8 billion deficit, and we don't like having a deficit. In fact, we're very clear that we have a great aversion to deficits, and we're going to pay off the debt that's accumulated over the next three years through deficits as quickly as we possibly can.

So yes, we do take seriously how we go into these federal-provincial infrastructure programs. We want to arrange them in such a way as to protect our taxpayers, and we think that's something that our taxpayers want us to do. I'm sorry that the member thinks there's something wrong with taking that sort of an approach, but we think that's the prudent, responsible thing to do and that's why we took the time to do it right.

S. Fraser: I don't know where to begin with that one. The priorities of the government.... Before the election the promise was a \$465 million deficit. The post-election reality was a \$2.8 or \$2.9 billion deficit. The slashing that's happened in every community organization and good group that does the work in the province, often on behalf of the ministries.... They've been gutted. Those priorities certainly don't resonate with British

Columbians, not any of the ones that I talk to. I just try to get around that rhetoric.

The fact is that I'm referring to the lateness of these moneys coming out, and the minister is talking about announcements at the UBCM. By the time of the UBCM the rest of the province was rolling with shovel-ready projects, and we were not.

So yeah, I understand the announcements made by the Premier at the UBCM. I heard comments made at the UBCM that the reason for the lateness of that announcement, why we were so far behind, was so that there could be an announcement for the Premier to make at the UBCM. I don't know whether that's true or not. I'm sure the minister probably doesn't want to comment on that one.

Can the minister tell us how many community proposals that were put in were denied?

[1015]

Hon. B. Bennett: Because the ministry is responsible for the community infrastructure component of infrastructure programs, we're a little bit uncertain about the totals. The Ministry of Transportation and Infrastructure is involved in this, and the Solicitor General's ministry is involved in flood mitigation projects.

So there are three different ministries involved in this, but we're quite confident that we're close on the numbers. We think there were 465 applications in total. Just so the member understands, this is the whole infrastructure program that started in 2008, a number of announcements early in 2009, more announcements in September 2009. It's all part of the same infrastructure program — 465 applications in total.

We think that in the order of 183 to 185 projects were approved between the April announcement and the September announcement. That would cover the Ministry of Transportation and Infrastructure and some flood mitigation projects as well as the community infrastructure projects that we're responsible for.

I think it's probably worth, just for the member's benefit, letting him know what Robert Hobson, the president of the UBCM, said about the infrastructure announcements in September, which incidentally, did not happen during UBCM. They happened before UBCM.

This is what Mr. Hobson said. He said that "UBCM is very appreciative of the collective work by the federal and provincial governments to deliver this funding to local priorities." He said some other nice things as well.

Again, to the member, when these projects were announced, local government in this province was ecstatic. We worked very, very closely with every community on their projects. We chose the best projects across the province in various constituencies. Lots and lots of opposition-held ridings got infrastructure projects. We chose the best projects, as I say, on the merits of the projects.

[1020]

We made sure that the communities could get those projects completed by the deadline, and as far as I am aware, local government is very, very pleased with the rollout, both in April and then in September.

S. Fraser: The minister said he's uncertain of the exact numbers because it's a split between the Solicitor General's office and Transportation and Infrastructure. Isn't it true that Community and Rural Development actually is the stickhandler of this money before it goes out? I mean, aren't you ultimately responsible for this money? It didn't disappear into three different directions. It came to your ministry, and you are responsible for all of the.... I'm talking about the \$520 million federal infrastructure stimulus funds.

Hon. B. Bennett: No, the member is not correct about that. We, the Ministry of Community and Rural Development, get the funds we require to fund the projects that we are responsible for, which is community-based infrastructure — typically, water and sewer. MOTI, or the Ministry of Transportation and Infrastructure, gets the accumulation of federal and provincial funds for their projects, and the same thing would be true of the flood mitigation projects that the Solicitor General's ministry is involved with.

This is something that I've always been kind of perplexed about with the opposition. I hear them sometimes standing up in question period, and they don't seem to recognize that we have a ministry that's called the Ministry of Transportation and Infrastructure. It's called the Ministry of Transportation and Infrastructure because they're responsible for infrastructure.

Actually, my colleague Minister Bond is responsible for negotiating the deal, if you will, between the province and the federal government on infrastructure — all infrastructure, including community-based infrastructure. Once that deal is negotiated, then yes, obviously, our ministry gets involved in the community infrastructure.

We have the experts within the ministry that rate water and sewer projects, and we get involved to that extent. But we are not the lead in terms of these infrastructure programs; it's the Ministry of Transportation and Infrastructure.

S. Fraser: The minister has referred numerous times to the flood abatement program through the Solicitor General's office, I believe. I'm confused. I didn't believe that was part of the \$520 million of federal funds accessible through the infrastructure stimulus funds — the flood abatement money that the minister keeps referring to.

For clarification, how much of the \$520 million federal package went towards the Solicitor General's ministry for flood abatement?

Hon. B. Bennett: In the first intake that I referred to yesterday for infrastructure projects, there was \$25 million

provincial money that went to flood mitigation. It, I think, was a 50-50 program with the federal government — so 50-cent dollars. We put in 25, and they put in 25. Then in the second intake, the results of which were announced in September, there were 11 projects totalling \$4.1 million in provincial funding. That's the breakdown on the flood mitigation moneys that were awarded.

[1025]

Let me back up just for a second, because I gave the member incorrect information. I did it inadvertently and honestly. I thought that the Solicitor General would have administered those programs because, normally, flood mitigation is considered to be part of that ministry. I am advised that our ministry actually administers those particular projects as well. So we are doing that as well as the community infrastructure.

S. Fraser: Thanks to the minister for that. That clears up my confusion. It says \$50 million in total, but \$25 million of the federal money. That's still only one-half, one-half. I thought that the \$520 million from the feds was to be matched three ways, provincial and municipal. Can the minister comment?

Hon. B. Bennett: In the case of projects where the infrastructure is owned by the province, there is no third party to share. It's the province and the federal government. That, of course, is 50-50. In the case of the flood mitigation projects, they are also 50-50. This is completely in line with the terms of reference of the agreement between Canada and B.C.

With community-based infrastructure like the water and the sewer, there's obviously potential for a third partner in that, and those projects are shared one-third, one-third, one-third.

S. Fraser: Thanks for that. I wasn't aware of that. I've learned something today.

We've got \$25 million plus \$4 million, of which I assume half was provincial, half federal. So there's \$29.1 million of the \$520 million accessible from the feds, a fairly small portion of it. The minister kept referring to flood abatement as sort of a key issue where money was going. It's actually a very small percentage of the federal money, the \$520 million, that was made available to B.C. through the infrastructure stimulus fund.

I must say that I have some confusion. My calculator may have died here, but there's \$520 million federal money on the table for B.C., and the minister has claimed that all of that is being utilized or is leveraging all of that. By my calculations, \$313.6 million of that \$520 million have been utilized, leaving outstanding \$206.4 million of federal money still on the table that B.C. has not utilized. I'm already building in that \$70 million that has been set aside for Vancouver city.

What about the other \$206.4 million of federal funds left over? I'm not talking about that Building Canada fund but the infrastructure stimulus fund.

Hon. B. Bennett: Well, the member wants to talk about one component of the infrastructure program, which is the stimulus funds, which is \$500-odd million. However, there was \$58½ million of provincial dollars spent on infrastructure in April 2009. There was an additional \$52½ million announced in September for infrastructure that is not part of the \$500 million stimulus fund. Then there was, as I told the member yesterday, a \$65 million top-up to the Building Canada fund that was announced. Those projects were announced, again, in September of 2009.

There's a lot more going on there than the \$500 million stimulus. I get that the member seems to want to focus on that, and that's fine. I would say that other than the city of Vancouver and other than some provincial capital projects that have not been announced yet, the bulk of the \$500 million has actually been announced. I don't know how the member has done his math.

I don't believe that estimates have been done yet with the Ministry of Transportation and Infrastructure. I would strongly advise the member to ask this question of my colleague. I'm sure that she'll be able to give the member more detail on what is left to be done.

[1030]

S. Fraser: My questions weren't around the Building Canada fund. I'm asking about the infrastructure stimulus funds, the \$520 million. Only \$313 million of the federal portion has been utilized by British Columbia, leaving \$206.4 million outstanding. These are the infrastructure stimulus funds, federal money. So why are we not using the \$206.4 million of federal money that was designated for British Columbia?

Split three ways, of course — multiplied times three — that's over \$600 million of economic stimulus that B.C. has not accessed. The minister explained that of the 465 applications from communities that came forth, only 185 were approved. Why were the bulk of the proposals and applications turned down when there's \$206.4 million of federal funds left on the table, which would amount to \$619.2 million of economic stimulus that British Columbia is not getting?

Hon. B. Bennett: I'll correct or clarify one thing the member said. I think the member is under the impression that the \$500 million in stimulus money from the federal government was intended 100 percent for community infrastructure. That's not correct. It wasn't; it never was.

If the member would review the terms of reference for the agreement between Canada and British Columbia, he would find that, just as there is with every province, there is allowance both for the community-type infrastructure

— water and sewer — that this ministry is involved with but also for provincially owned assets such as interchanges, bridges, highways and that sort of thing that the Ministry of Transportation and Infrastructure is responsible for.

All I can do in these estimates for this ministry is give the member the details on the projects that involve community-based infrastructure. We did that yesterday. I think the member has the numbers. I can give the member the numbers again if he wants them.

That's what we're responsible for. That's our portion of the estimates discussion on infrastructure. For the remaining dollars out of that \$500 million stimulus fund, he should ask the Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure. I'm sure she will be able to explain where the rest of the money went.

The Chair: If I could have the member direct his questions towards the Community and Rural Development budget estimates for 2009. I'd just like to let you know that the Ministry of Transportation and Infrastructure has already completed its budget estimates.

[1035]

S. Fraser: I'm aware of that. Thank you very much, hon. Chair. I'm referring to the infrastructure stimulus funds. I'm just getting clarification on that now.

I must say that I find this somewhat obfuscating. When I ask questions about the infrastructure stimulus funds, the minister keeps repeating things about flood abatement, which amounts to.... Of the \$520 million of federal, it's \$20 million or \$25 million of the federal, so it's a small portion. Then he keeps going back to other funds, Build Canada funds and stuff, when I'm asking about the infrastructure stimulus package. Then he tells me that, no, I've got to go to other ministries to deal with this.

When the \$520 million of infrastructure money was announced by the feds to be available, and the number was not made available.... All the public got from either the province or the feds was that we were eligible for a portion of the \$4 billion that was out there. Nobody in the province got any clarification on the \$520 million for B.C. till yesterday in estimates. The minister admitted \$520 million was the B.C. portion.

Now the minister is telling me that he can't tell me where the money went, that we've got to spread that over a bunch of other ministries. He has given me numbers, leaving \$206 million of the federal dollars on the table. Now, has all of that \$520 million been utilized for the province of British Columbia?

Hon. B. Bennett: Well, I'm sorry that the member didn't ask enough questions or the right questions of the Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure to understand what money went through that ministry. That's part of the estimates process. That's definitely what the member should be doing.

I can only talk about my ministry. I am intimately familiar with what my ministry is involved in, and I'm happy to discuss that with the members opposite to their hearts' content. But I really am not that familiar with the Ministry of Transportation and Infrastructure.

Again, I would invite the member to go and have a meeting with the minister responsible. I'm thinking she would be more than happy to provide the information that the member needs.

If the member wants me to read into the record again the community-based infrastructure projects that came out of the \$520 million, I'd be happy to do that. I can tell the member — and I think this is the key question and the key answer for the member — that all \$520 million offered by the federal government is or will be matched by the province of British Columbia.

S. Fraser: Last question on this, and then we'll move along. There were hundreds of communities that were denied their project proposals for their one-third, one-third infrastructure money. The minister admitted that not all this \$520 million was going to go to the communities anyway — some to provincially owned assets.

Does the minister not perceive a conflict of interest there for the government? I know that it might seem like a foolish question, but bear with me.

Communities put in their applications in good faith. The economic stimulus money was designed to hit the ground for these communities to create opportunities and economic stimulus after they'd been hit hard in a recession. If the ministries are now taking the money and competing for that money with communities....

[1040]

It appears there is \$206.4 million of federal money that has not been on the table for communities. That's approaching half of the entire federal stimulus package.

The question to the minister, related directly to his ministry in this budget estimates, is: were these communities that were denied competing with other ministries such as the Ministry of Transportation and Infrastructure?

Hon. B. Bennett: Well, with the greatest respect to the member, it's ludicrous to use a term like "conflict of interest." The UBCM, local government, understands — the member doesn't, obviously — that when there's a federal-provincial infrastructure program, the money is shared between community-based infrastructure and things like bridges and roads and interchanges.

That is the way it was in the 1990s, when the members opposite were in government. That is the way it is today. Everybody knows that's the way it is. That was the expectation. Nobody was surprised by that.

What's kind of surprising, I think, is that the member doesn't seem to appreciate the fact that when the province and the federal government invest in, let's say, an interchange outside of a small community or a big

community, it creates jobs. It creates economic activity, and the local community wants it. They ask for these things. They ask.

In my case, there's a bridge project, which was announced in April as part of the infrastructure program, east of Sparwood coming in from Alberta. It's a bridge where we've seen horrible, horrible accidents over the years. There's no local government money in that. It's not one-third, one-third, one-third. It's 50-50, or it's some breakdown of allocation of cost between the federal government and the provincial government. The district of Sparwood, the district of Elkford and the city of Fernie are all happy about that.

I don't understand why the member thinks it's a bad thing for the province to invest in infrastructure using these federal dollars. As I say, it is the ordinary way of carrying out these infrastructure programs and always has been. We do have other programs that we've used to fund local infrastructure, which I'll mention for the member's benefit just so he can put it into his notes and know about this.

One is called the Towns for Tomorrow program that we started to assist small communities under 5,000 in population. We actually fund 80 percent of the infrastructure costs in the communities. Because they're smaller, they only have to come up with 20 percent. Then there is another program called LocalMotion that we use to fund small-town infrastructure. I'd be happy to give the member more details on where that money has gone. It's gone across the province as well.

S. Fraser: Thanks to the minister for that. I am a new critic here. So the comments that I might be naive on this — I'll take that.

The minister, obviously a new minister, is somewhat naive, too, to equate historic infrastructure money with an economic stimulus package from the federal government designed to stimulate the economy in a worldwide recession. To suggest that that is the same as the ongoing economic infrastructure money that comes in for necessary road projects and stuff is problematic, if the minister sees no difference there.

So he can take his shot at me, but the problem is that the province may have had other ideas. Certainly, the communities would have had other ideas.

[1045]

If almost half of the economic stimulus money from the federal government was actually hived off to do necessary projects — infrastructure projects that already had to be done and were on the books for the province, and the province was responsible for them — I wonder what formula was used to determine how much of the \$520 million would go towards prioritized community projects and how much would go towards just general capital projects that the province was planning on anyway.

Hon. B. Bennett: There is no formula that's used to determine any sort of allocation between community-based infrastructure and provincially owned assets. I'm going to say flood mitigation, because even though the member doesn't think \$30 million or \$40 million is significant, I think it is significant.

There's no formal formula for arriving at the allocation. It really is a process of two things. It's a process of negotiation — negotiation with UBCM; negotiation, I suppose, within government — and an exercise, first of all, of committing that we're going to match all the federal dollars, which I have confirmed for the member here today and which I think the taxpayers are most interested in, and what we can afford.

We went through that exercise. It was particularly challenging in this last go-round to go through that process of deciding where to spend the money, what types of dollars to put into what types of projects, which projects could be done by March 2011 and which ones could not be. It did take some extra time to go through all that, but what we're interested in, both this ministry and the Ministry of Transportation and Infrastructure, is getting the best value for the B.C. taxpayer.

So bottom line, B.C. is matching the federal dollars. We are getting great value out of the provincial dollars that we're using to match the federal money. We're creating literally thousands of jobs, even though I don't know why the member doesn't accept the fact that stimulus means stimulus. But we're getting thousands of jobs out of this investment. Some of it is going to community infrastructure, and some of it is going to highways and bridges and other provincially owned infrastructure.

S. Fraser: Okay. Well, I'll move off this, although I've got to say no plan from the province on the \$520 million; no single ministry that seems to know where the money went, although there are vague assurances that the money has all been used; no rationale for who got what and what portion would be taken away for provincial projects and local government projects denied. This does not breed a lot of confidence in the people of British Columbia today.

I'm going to move on to community development trust. Tens of thousands of forestry workers, their families and forest communities across the province, of course, have been hurting for years under this government's handling of being spectators while the forest industry has been going through crisis.

[1050]

A community development trust was set up. Some \$185 million, by my estimation, was the total amount of the community development trust. By my estimation, only \$30 million of that was provincial. By my calculations — I could be wrong here — \$138 million or \$139 million maybe has been spent out of the community development trust, and this is to help workers in crisis in

the province. So \$30 million from the province is all we got, a fairly large portion from the federal government.

Am I correct on this? By my calculations, is there still \$47 million left over in the community development trust?

Hon. B. Bennett: There's between \$26 million and \$27 million left in the community development trust. The reason that's an approximate number is that although we have a number of applications that have been approved in the three categories, sometimes people don't follow through. Some of that money may or may not be paid out, but if everyone comes through and does what they say they're going to do in these three different components of the community development trust, we would have in the order of about \$26 million.

S. Fraser: Thanks to the minister for that. I was off by a significant amount — by \$20 million — so thank you for that.

The federal portion was so much greater proportionally than what the province put in. Is there an explanation for that? Has the minister ever considered trying to match those funds, considering the magnitude of the problems for forestry workers and their families and the forest communities involved?

[1055]

Hon. B. Bennett: Well, again, \$30 million of provincial taxpayers' money is not to be diminished, I think, in terms of how much effort it takes for taxpayers to send us that amount of money. We certainly were grateful to get the federal money to help through the community development trust program, and when we put our \$30 million in last year, the federal government came to the table again and matched those dollars again. Again, we're grateful for that.

The province — any government, especially during times like today when we're in a global recession — has to make difficult decisions about where we're going to spend our money. We had already invested \$50 million in the Southern Interior Development Initiative Trust. We'd invested \$50 million in the corresponding Island economic trust, and there was \$135 million put into the Northern Development Initiative Trust. A lot of that money — in fact, I would say all of that money — is ending up in communities that are forest-dependent to one degree or another. We've also put a lot of provincial tax dollars into infrastructure.

We just finished talking about infrastructure. There are dozens and dozens of communities in this province where we've invested through the Canada-B.C. infrastructure program in community infrastructure and in highways, roads and streets through the community.

We've invested in community colleges. In the city of Cranbrook, where I come from, over the past five years there's been over \$30 million invested in the local college, over \$30

million invested in the regional hospital. We've invested in hospitals all over the province. We've invested in over 30 different airports across the province, all in places where the forest industry is an important industry.

We have chosen to invest, I think, strategically and within the context of difficult economic times to make sure that we maximize the use of these provincial tax dollars.

S. Fraser: I'm shocked by the minister's response of \$30 million. Tens of thousands of forestry workers out of work, and then he starts talking about \$50 million going into various trusts in the province. That was the only tangible result we've seen from the murky B.C. Rail deal. The minister is stretching things to the extreme here. Thirty million dollars is what he judges as a fair amount of money from the province to help tens of thousands of forestry workers that have built the economy of this province.

[J. Thornthwaite in the chair.]

There's now \$600 million and counting on a retractable roof for B.C. Place, a \$500 million cost overrun on a single building in downtown Vancouver and \$30 million for forestry workers that built this province. I guess there's not much more to ask about that, except the ministry.... One of the last things the ministry did was change the rules for eligibility for that meagre money for those workers, making many of them ineligible specifically if they're under 60 years old.

Can the minister explain the rationale for cutting loose so many forest workers and their families?

[1100]

Hon. B. Bennett: Hon. Chair, welcome to the chair.

The main principle underlying the transition program was one of revitalizing the industry and enabling older workers to move out into retirement, thereby creating spaces for younger workers to move in. Actually, despite what the member may think, it has been an extremely successful program.

We found that by changing the age from 55 to 60, we could actually help more workers. Again, it's what government is supposed to do. It's supposed to get as much as it possibly can out of the use of taxpayer dollars. We found that by changing the age, we could transition more workers out.

We also found that when the threshold was 55, a lot of the 55- to 60-year-old workers did not in fact leave the industry. They might leave that job, but they would pop up again someplace else in the industry. The principle of trying to renew the industry was not being met as effectively when the age was 55, and we think that it actually has worked quite well since the age was changed to 60. I can tell the member that we know that we have helped,

through the community development trust, well over 7,000 laid-off forest workers in this province.

I can tell the member that when I was at UBCM, I had mayors coming up to me and tugging on my sleeve every day that I was out in the halls. When they came in for meetings, they said the same thing to me — how well the community development trust programs worked: the transition program, the tuition program, the job opportunities program.

I would suggest to the member that this has been one of the most successful programs that the province of B.C. has ever been involved in. As far as I'm concerned, certainly from what I've heard from local government, they agree with that.

S. Fraser: Madam Chair, welcome to the chair.

I'd ask the minister to get out a bit more and maybe have his staff forward him some of the letters that come from forestry workers. I've got one here from a woman from Port Alberni. This is not atypical. I get dozens of these as critic, so I can only imagine what the minister or the ministry staff must get.

"My husband was waiting to apply for the displaced forest workers fund for workers willing to retire. He turned 55 years old in June of 2009. At the last minute the criteria was changed, and they announced that you needed to be 60 years old. We have tried to appeal on the grounds that the website posted the age criteria as 55 years right up until Canada Day.

"It was shocking and depressing for our family, who have worked in the forest industry for many years. We are currently losing our family home, which is being repossessed by the bank due to lack of work in the industry.

"We have had the Ombudsman do an investigation but have just learned that the decision for the change was made at a government level beyond the community development funding. In short, we are unable to appeal, and the Ombudsman was unable to assist.

"Our business paid taxes for 13 years prior to losing our contract work. Is there anything we can do to save our home?"

"Sincerely," — well, I won't say her name, but I can make it available to the ministry and the ministry staff.

[1105]

Does the minister care to comment? In a gala affair at the UBCM, when somebody pulled his sleeve and said that everything's going well.... What about the people on the ground, the forestry workers that have been abandoned by this government, and \$30 million was all the province provided, and then they changed the criteria and pulled the rug out from people like this?

Hon. B. Bennett: To repeat what I said a minute ago, by changing the threshold from 55 to 60, we're actually able to help more forest workers. We think that was the right decision, because we were able to help more forest workers.

I mean, the opposition loves to get in here and get up on their high horse and preach about how much they care and how little we care. I know just as many laid-off forest

workers as the member does. I can tell the member that I know as many laid-off forest workers as anybody sitting over there, and I have spent just as much time working with them. I'm just as familiar with the problems that they encounter and the challenges that they have in their lives.

Through the community development trust program, we provide the opportunity for these laid-off forest workers to make choices. They can make choices. Now, I don't know the situation of the unfortunate person that wrote the letter, and I am empathetic to the person and the family. I am sorry that they were suffering. But this program provided opportunities for laid-off forest workers to make choices.

There are choices that people can make around tuition. There are lots of laid-off forest workers who have chosen to take training, to learn a new skill and to participate in the economy differently than they did when they worked in the mill or in the bush. That's not easy. Speaking as somebody who totally retrained at the age of 40, from working with my hands to getting a law degree, I know, actually, what that's like.

I have some experience with that. It's not easy. The choices are there, and laid-off forest workers have the option of applying, through the tuition assistance program, for up to \$5,000 to help them retrain.

The member read into the record one example of not a good situation, and I agree with the member that it's not a good situation. Let me read into the record, hon. Chair, a different kind of situation.

A gentleman — I have his name, but maybe I won't use his name. He is 56 years old. He never expected to find himself in a classroom at the age of 56, but after a long career in the B.C. forest industry.... This man is from Duncan, not too far, really, from where the member opposite comes from. He spent 25 years falling timber on the Island here, and he was back in school. He went to Vancouver Island University. He's pursuing a new career in heating, ventilation, air conditioning and refrigeration. That's a good skill to have. That's a good trade to have. The program was used, in that case, to help that person, to give that person a leg up.

Again, I have staff here who have dedicated the last few years of their life to this program and making sure that it works and making sure that these moneys are used effectively. It has been a marvellous and very successful program from start to finish.

S. Fraser: The minister said they made the choice to change the criteria because it was the most efficient way to deal with the community development trust. The choice that the minister didn't make was providing some decent funding to the workers of British Columbia that have been devastated by losing their jobs.

The \$30 million, when you compare it to the giant cost overruns on so many megaprojects that this

government has done, is a pittance. It's a shame that the minister doesn't appreciate what is happening on the ground with forest workers and their families.

[1110]

The last question for me for the time being, because I'm going to turn it over to a colleague.... There was \$2 million designated from the community development trust, if I'm not mistaken, into Mackenzie, Fort St. James, out of the trust money for immediate assistance when those communities were devastated by notices of mill closures. Kitimat has just gone through the same.

This has been probed a bit in question period — where we don't always get answers because it's just question period. But since the minister has admitted that there's \$26 million or \$27 million left over in the trust, will help be coming immediately for the community of Kitimat?

Hon. B. Bennett: The member is correct — \$2 million went to each of Fort St. James and Mackenzie and with good reason. I'm proud of that decision. I know that the Minister of Forests is as well.

Those communities are almost entirely forest-dependent. There is a measurement that government does to determine the dependency of communities on the forest industry. We determine what portion of the income that's earned in a community is from the forest industry, and in Kitimat's case, it's 14 percent.

[C. Trevena in the chair.]

It's not insignificant, and there's nothing insignificant or unimportant about the fact that 535 people lost their jobs in Kitimat. There's nothing insignificant about that. It is a big deal. However, the member raised the comparison of Kitimat with Fort St. James and Mackenzie. In Mackenzie, for example, the amount of income that's derived in that community from forestry was up over 70 percent. So you've got 70 percent versus 14 percent. Mackenzie doesn't have a deep-water port.

The member heard the Minister of Forests go through this yesterday, and I won't go through it all. But Kitimat has opportunities. It's not going to be easy. Doing an economic transition is not easy. I've seen them. Where I come from in the Kootenays, the city of Kimberley is a great example of a community that saw an industry that was declining and went in another direction and built their tourism industry. In the case of Kitimat, we're going to have to do that. We're going to have to help Kitimat diversify its economy.

To that point, we have staff in Kitimat. They've been in Kitimat even before the layoff announcement — helping Kitimat develop a strategy for taking advantage of the many very concrete opportunities that they have with the deep-water port, with the liquid natural gas

opportunities, the pipeline, the mining opportunities and the recent announcement of the investment in the power line going up Highway 37.

So it isn't a fair comparison, hon. Chair, to compare Mackenzie and Fort St. James with Kitimat. We will not be making the same decision with Kitimat. We're going to skin this cat a different way. We're going to help them solve their problem in a different way because they have, frankly, a different problem.

The other thing that I should close with, I guess, is that workers in Kitimat in that mill are going to be working till at least the end of the year, so we do have some time to work with the community and come up with a good plan for them.

M. Sather: I wanted to ask the minister some questions about an issue that I'm sure he's heard a lot about and had a number of discussions with local government. The local government or governments in question is the Metro Vancouver regional district, and my communities in Maple Ridge and Pitt Meadows are among those. It's around the issue of garbage and how to deal with it.

I think that Metro Van mayors and officials were a little surprised by the announcement in the throne speech that the international exportation of solid waste or garbage would be outlawed by the government. I haven't heard anything more about that since then from the government. I just want to clarify: is it still the government's intention to outlaw the international export of garbage?

[1115]

Hon. B. Bennett: The short answer is yes. It was in the throne speech. Government's intention is to remove the option for local government to export their pollution problems to other jurisdictions. We think that's the right thing to do. I would suspect that the member thinks it's the right thing to do. We're not changing our mind on that.

M. Sather: When will the government be making...? I guess it's a law that we have to have. Or is it a regulation? How will the change be made, and when can local government expect it to be done?

Hon. B. Bennett: Just for the member's benefit in terms of his understanding of responsibilities of various ministries, I will do my best with this topic. It is formally the responsibility of the Ministry of Environment. I don't know, actually, whether the Ministry of Environment has done their estimates yet, but if they haven't, it's a great opportunity for the member to ask the minister where that process is.

I can tell the member that we did have quite a good meeting with Metro's executive. The three mayors came in not long ago, I think probably a couple of weeks ago,

and we discussed — this aspect wasn't a big issue; it was discussed — more generally what they were going to do with their solid waste and their liquid waste. As I say, I think it was a good discussion, and we're going to carry on working with them to help them.

But, in particular, the statement made in the throne speech — the government has no intentions of backing up on that. To get the details on how and when that decision will be implemented into formal policy or legislation, the member would have to ask the Minister of Environment.

M. Sather: Well, we all know, in the area where I live, that our solid waste has been going up to Cache Creek in truckload after truckload, and I'm sure that all of the members of the governing party, just as we are, are concerned about the pollution that's the result of having to transport that.

But one of the things I'm not clear on around Cache Creek... I'm hoping the minister has had some discussions about this. I've heard that the Cache Creek landfill will be full to capacity next year, but I've also heard that it could be up to three years. Has the minister had any discussions with local government about that and any idea on what's happening there?

Hon. B. Bennett: Again, the formal responsibility for this is with the Ministry of Environment. I did have a meeting with John Ranta, at UBCM, who is a very articulate advocate for his community, and he talked about the jobs that are associated with the landfill. He has plans and his community has plans to keep that landfill going and to have it available should Metro decide that that's the option they're going to choose.

[1120]

I can't with any certainty answer the member's question in terms of whether it's going to be available as one of the options for sure. I know that it's a question that should be asked of the Minister of Environment. Because his ministry is the regulator that has formal responsibility for this, I'm thinking that he's going to know more about it than I do.

M. Sather: Then, with regard to the solid waste management plan, I'll certainly defer that to the Minister of Environment. But this is a big issue for local government in our area. Everybody is really worried about it, as near as I can determine, and trying to figure out what to do with all the solid waste that we produce, given that our current option is apparently closing fairly quickly.

The plan that apparently has the most support — I don't know the numbers, but I understand that it has considerable support from the chair of Metro Van, and Marvin Hunt and so on are supporting it, and others, I'm sure — is to build up to six incinerators in our region. But those are five to seven years away. Again, my

understanding is that they are some distance away, some time away.

Our region has to find some way to deal with the problem in the interim, should that be the way that we go — the incineration route. I'm not sure about the minister, because he's from the Kootenays, but members of the government have been very opposed in the past to some of the emissions of the natural gas plant in Washington State, a few years back.

There are a number of different ways to look at it, but the upshot is that Metro Van mayors are at a loss as to what they should do with their garbage. If we are able to expand Cache Creek.... My understanding is that Mayor Ranta is certainly a very strong advocate for expanding the Cache Creek facility, given that the other facility that we were going to have at Ashcroft fell through due to opposition from first nations.

In the discussions that the minister has with his colleagues, and in the discussion that he certainly has been having with local government in the Metro Van region, what is he advising or encouraging local government, to fill the gap before incineration comes on line, should that be the route that Metro Van goes?

Hon. B. Bennett: I appreciate the fact that the member is here, not just as a member of the opposition but also as a member representing a community that is concerned about this. I applaud the member's interest in wanting to know where this is going to end up. He's just doing his job, and his constituents should be pleased with that.

When Metro came in to meet with me, I had the Minister of Environment there and the Minister of Aboriginal Relations as well, so they had the opportunity to hear from the Minister of Environment as well as myself and the Minister of Aboriginal Relations.

[1125]

They presented a PowerPoint to us and went through, I think, all of the major options that they are considering for solid waste treatment. I'm not sure if the member thinks that a decision has been made about incineration. It's certainly my understanding that no final decision has been made. In fact, I'm quite sure about that. No final decision has been made.

They're considering options. They've done an enormous amount of work, and frankly, Metro is to be commended for the work they've done on this. All of their options are feasible to varying extents, and they're going to have to now work with the regulator, which is the provincial Ministry of Environment, to determine which of those options or what combination of options they choose to go with.

They did also mention their strong commitment to reducing the amount of solid waste that needs to be processed. Obviously, I'm sure that that principle would be supported by both sides of the House. They're trying

to reduce their solid waste, I think, in Metro by something like 40 percent, which is an aggressive target but certainly the right thing to do.

M. Sather: My understanding is that Metro wants to get to a 70 percent diversion of solid waste, which leaves the remaining 30 percent, I guess, largely to be incinerated. I guess there are some small parts that can't be incinerated either.

In those discussions that the minister had with those government officials — I understand that the decision hasn't been made, but there seems to be a feeling in my community, anyway, that it's going towards incineration, although not yet decided — did Metro Van talk about separation and diversion, you know, or alternative ways?

Like in Europe, apparently, they have these.... I don't know what you call them, but it's basically an area where you bring in all your garbage. It's a one-stop shop kind of thing — resource parks, they call them — and everything is separated and sorted there. Apparently, they're getting much better results.

The other thing is around packaging. We know that there's a tremendous amount of packaging, and it's so frustrating when you get an article from your local hardware store, and it's got so much plastic around it. Not only is it a huge amount of plastic, but it's very difficult to get off. That would be a question, I'm sure — with regard to regulating packaging — that the minister would say is probably for the Ministry of Environment.

I guess my question is: does the minister feel, from the information he's had and the discussions that he's had with Metro Van officials, that they're putting equal weight on other options, or does he feel that more of the impetus is towards incineration?

Hon. B. Bennett: I'll do my best again for the member. Not being formally responsible for this, but having attended the meeting, I can tell the member that there were a multitude of options that Metro is considering — a far greater range of options than simply incineration.

I can tell the member that they have done a lot of work. They've been to Europe to visit waste management systems there, to examine how they work and how they don't work, and they have not made a decision. They can't make a decision unilaterally in any case. It has to be approved by the provincial Minister of Environment.

I can see that the member is concerned on behalf of his communities about incineration. I think that the member should keep plugging away here for his community, keep his eye on the ball and learn more about the options that Metro is considering.

[1130]

But for now, here today in the estimates for the Ministry of Community and Rural Development, I

don't really think there's much more that I can offer to the member other than the fact that they're considering quite a wide range of options.

M. Sather: Just one last question on that subject to the minister. Well, the concern that has been expressed by mayors and councillors that I have talked to — some of them — is that, yeah, it's not just about getting rid of garbage or solid waste, but it's also about the generation of electricity. Their feeling is, rightly or wrongly, that the impetus for incineration has as much to do with making money from generating electricity as it does to dealing with solid waste.

I know that the government — all of them, including the member who was Energy Minister at one time — is very supportive of independent power projects. So I'd like to ask the minister: is the direction that they're taking — for example, in closing the door on an interim measure of exporting solid waste to the U.S. — in part to support independent power production as much as it is to deal with solid waste?

Hon. B. Bennett: The policy that the government has announced in the throne speech goes to our belief that British Columbia should not be able to export its problems — its pollution problems, or its garbage problems — to different jurisdictions. We've made a commitment to do our best to fight climate change. As a small jurisdiction, obviously we're not a big player, we've made a commitment to do everything that we possibly can.

We're doing our best to create and deliver policies in the province that allow us to manage the natural environment carefully and sustainably. We just don't think that allowing local government, or even the province itself, to export its pollution problems is an option that taxpayers want us to support.

There is no conspiracy with regard to independent power production. That's a different kettle of fish, and I guess the member can take that up with the Minister of Energy, Mines and Petroleum Resources. This principle that was set out in the throne speech is entirely based on our belief that we shouldn't be exporting our problems to other jurisdictions.

M. Sather: One other area that I wanted to ask the minister about is the regional growth strategy that Metro Van is involved in — the remake of the Liberal region strategy, if you will, from the '90s.

One of the concerns.... Well, as the minister probably knows, member municipalities are being asked to designate their lands as urban or rural. I know that a concern in Maple Ridge that has been expressed by some folks to me — and I'm kind of watching this process unfold — is that the municipality is asking Metro Van to designate areas as rural that currently do not have a rural designation.

Subsequently, the push is to extend the urban boundary of Maple Ridge to include those areas within the urban boundary. If this goes through, apparently it will result in about 285 hectares of current rural lands becoming urban, and some of those lands are within the ALR. Some are not, but quite a bit of our agricultural production is outside the ALR in Maple Ridge. I wonder if the minister has had discussions with Metro Van on that issue and what his thoughts are on it.

[1135]

Hon. B. Bennett: The impetus behind regional growth strategies comes from the Local Government Act. I'm advised that the impetus was actually created back in the 1990s, and I think that it was a good decision by the government of the day to encourage regional districts to do regional growth strategies.

Having said that, I have already learned in the short time I've been minister that they are interesting processes of negotiation. We as a ministry and as government don't direct the various parties involved in a regional district. Whether it's the greater Vancouver regional district or the regional district of Central Kootenay, we don't tell them what they should end up with in terms of a regional growth strategy. They all recognize the benefit of working together and having that common perspective on how they want their home region to be in the future.

What's happening today is that there's an existing regional growth strategy in the greater Vancouver regional district. They have decided they want to update it. I'm sure that it was a majority decision at the board table. They're engaged in negotiations with one another on the update to the existing regional growth strategy. I have not actually spoken directly with Metro about the regional growth strategy. I have had a meeting with the mayor of Maple Ridge, which the member is probably aware of, where similar concerns were expressed.

If there is a disagreement between the members of a regional district in the process of negotiating changes to a regional growth strategy or in the creation of one, we will sometimes take up the role of traffic cop. We will mediate. We will try and bring the parties together and help them work to a successful conclusion, and we're doing that, actually, in a few situations around the province.

We have to do that sometimes — very, very difficult negotiations. Each local government within that regional district group has a different set of priorities, different taxpayer base and even different cultures in some cases, so it's hard to resolve everyone's points of view. But it's a worthwhile exercise. I think that ultimately they will find the right balance, but we are not going to tell them what that right balance is.

L. Popham: I'm under the impression that the farm assessment review panel falls under this ministry, and I'm just wondering if the minister would be able to confirm that for me.

Hon. B. Bennett: Yes.

L. Popham: The report was submitted this summer, and I'm wondering at what point the recommendations would be accepted or would be implemented for farmers in B.C.

Hon. B. Bennett: When I saw the member come in, I turned immediately to the farm assessment review project briefing note in my binder. The member knows that there are recommendations that go to 2010 and recommendations that go to 2011.

[1140]

What I can tell the member today is that we are looking seriously at the recommendations that relate to 2010. We have not made a final decision. It's government. There's process to go through. There is still some consideration of these recommendations to take place, but we're well along in terms of thinking about how and when.

With regard to the recommendations for 2011 and beyond, we are also discussing those in some considerable detail and trying to determine all of the implications of implementing those. We've got more time with those, and we're going to take some more time with those.

L. Popham: I understand that there's process in government, but the reason I bring this up is because the destructive way that this assessment project was initiated has actually brought a lot of damage, probably, to my constituency, Saanich South, and it's damage that is not reversible at this point. We've had farmers walk away from their farms outside of the agricultural land reserve.

I would like to impress upon the minister that the priority of finishing this project is crucial. The reason I'm saying that is because we have farms outside of my constituency — for example, in Sooke — that are trying to make future plans. The way that they have been treated through the assessment process... I think the future isn't certain for the way that they're able to continue their business.

The farm that I'm talking about is a farm in Sooke called ALM farm. They do a seed business. The future of it is in jeopardy because of these recommendations not being brought in, in prompt time.

I would just like to make sure that it's a priority, and I would like to know if I would be able to be included in those discussions about which recommendations would be accepted.

Hon. B. Bennett: I'm sorry. I took a little bit of time to discuss this with staff because I would like to be able

to give as much assurance and certainty to the member as I can on this.

I'd like the recommendations for the 2010 tax roll. We have the process that I referred to earlier. I'm going to do my very best to effect this change by regulation prior to the end of this year so that it would take effect in 2010.

I'm not there yet, so the member and the agricultural constituents that she refers to will still have some uncertainty. They should know that we're well down the road on this. Certainly, the minister likes the recommendations and is attempting to get this resolved before the end of the year. I think that's probably the closest to a commitment that the member can get from me here today.

[1145]

L. Popham: That's fine. I understand that there is a process. I'll repeat again that I would like to be included in some of those discussions about the recommendations.

Hon. B. Bennett: I'm sorry, hon. Chair. I should have responded to the member's request. I am more than happy to involve the member to whatever extent she wants to be involved in this discussion. Members of the opposition meet with me fairly regularly, and they're all invited to do that. Despite the fact that I might get a little testy in here with the member from Port Alberni, he's welcome in my office any day, if he has a problem that he wants to work through on behalf of his constituents.

The same holds true for the member asking the question. I know that she is an expert in agriculture, so I would value whatever advice she has.

S. Fraser: I know that we're finished here. I just want to thank the minister for making himself available today and answering the questions. I want to especially thank his staff for being here today. I appreciate the work you do. I hope you appreciate that my questioning and probing on issues may be somewhat aggressive at times back and forth with the minister, but it's no reflection on the work that you do.

So thank you very much, and thank you all for being here.

Vote 22: ministry operations, \$176,775,000 — approved.

Hon. B. Bennett: I move, hon. Chair, that the committee rise and report resolution of the ministry's estimates and ask leave to sit again.

Motion approved.

The committee rose at 11:47 a.m.

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