

The Assembly met at 1:30 p.m.

Prayers

ROUTINE PROCEEDINGS

NOTICES OF MOTIONS AND QUESTIONS

Mr. Boyd: -- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, I give notice that I shall on Thursday next move first reading of a Bill to amend The Health Districts Act.

INTRODUCTION OF GUESTS

Ms. Hamilton: -- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is indeed a pleasure and a privilege today to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Legislative Assembly approximately 12 members of the Camp Balmoral Sons of Scotland, which is the Regina branch of this national organization. As we all know, Tartan Day was declared April 6, 1992 in appreciation of the Scottish clans in Canada and was put forward in a private members' motion by the member from Kindersley. And today you've heard the bagpipes and hopefully have had a chance to see a bit of the Scottish dancing that was occurring in the rotunda earlier.

Included in the group that has come with the singers . . . or dancers and the bagpipe player are several past chieftains of the Camp Balmoral, and especially today, I would like to welcome Mr. Gordon Gardiner, who is the worthy grand chieftain of the Sons of Scotland of Canada.

Mr. Speaker, it's my pleasure to welcome them here today and to, on behalf of the members, say how much we enjoyed their presentation to honour today the Tartan Day in appreciation of the Scottish clans of Canada. I ask all members to join me in welcoming them here today.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Boyd: -- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker. April 6 is Tartan Day across Canada, and I'm pleased to extend, on behalf of the opposition, best wishes to the people of Scottish descent from across this province.

I had the privilege of introducing the legislation that allowed for a day of appreciation for the Scottish clans in Canada in the 1992 legislative session. Having Scottish blood, I was particularly pleased when this Bill passed without any incident, Mr. Speaker.

Tartan Day gives those of Scottish descent an opportunity to acknowledge their heritage and to play a role in building our province in Saskatchewan, Mr. Speaker. I'm sure that all members of the Assembly agree that Scottish people played an important role in Canada's history and wish all those of Scottish descent today, a very good day, Mr. Speaker.

I'd ask all members again to welcome the folks in the gallery this afternoon.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mrs. Bergman: -- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my honour today, Mr. Speaker, to introduce to you and through you to the members of this Assembly two visiting scholars at the University of Regina from Mongolia. They are in your east gallery.

Wang Jian Xia, lecturer in history at Hebei Normal University, and Professor Li from the department of engineering of Inner Mongolia building college. Their host today is Chris MacLeod.

The two scholars will be in Regina for one year, and we're very happy to have them here today. And I'd like the members of the Assembly to join me in welcoming them today.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Mr. Mitchell: -- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have the pleasure -- I think for the fourth time in this session -- to introduce a group of public servants who are spending the day in the legislature on one of their tours. They're seated in your gallery, Mr. Speaker. There are 19 individuals involved in today's tour from the Departments of Finance, Social Services, Labour, Economic Development, Energy and Mines, Justice, and SPMC (Saskatchewan Property Management Corporation).

Mr. Speaker, I'd like you and my colleagues in the legislature to welcome the public servants today.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

STATEMENTS BY MEMBERS

Notable Saskatchewan Scots

Ms. Hamilton: -- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As a member opposite mentioned, it is an honour to be able to welcome the guests who are representatives of the Sons of Scotland, and if you only have a little bit of the Scotsman in your soul, the next best thing is to be married to one, Mr. Speaker.

As I mentioned earlier, we're proud to have these guests today to help us recognize Tartan Day, April 6. This day is set aside in Canada to honour the contributions of Scottish people to Canadian life. The day was declared in Saskatchewan in 1992. Ninety seconds, of course, is far too brief a time to do more than mention some notable Saskatchewan Scots.

Hardly a day goes by in this House without at least one mention of Tommy Douglas who was born in Scotland and came to Canada as a child. Tartan Day would deserve recognition for this reason alone, but there have been many other notable Scots who have left their mark on our public life. Former premier and former federal Minister of Agriculture Jimmy Gardiner was a second-generation Scot. A long-time secretary of the Saskatchewan Wheat Pool, George Robertson,

and former president of the University of Saskatchewan, James Thompson, are just two more of the many that could be mentioned.

We can all name from our own personal knowledge Scots who have excelled in their chosen profession and have done so with grace, wit and determination. Another statement could be taken up with Scottish place names in Saskatchewan, and I'll give you just one example.

The Speaker: -- Order. The member's time has expired.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation Conference

Mr. Carlson: -- Mr. Speaker, the writer H.G. Wells said that the teacher is the real maker of history. That assertion might come as a shock to those of us here who might think that we have something to do with what goes on in the history books. We can also remind ourselves that often teachers are also the writers as well as the makers of history.

At any rate, as a member of the government caucus committee in education, I'm happy to announce that the annual meeting of the Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation is taking place this week in Regina.

Two hundred and fifty councillors representing their teacher colleagues from all over the province are here to conduct their own business, take part in various seminars and group sessions, listen to the Minister of Education give her annual address, and I suspect, Mr. Speaker, have the Minister of Education listen to them. Consultation I believe is what it's called.

Mr. Speaker, as a teacher yourself you know that the Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation is a key partner in our effort to enhance the quality of education for Saskatchewan students. We all know that the individual teacher is one, along with the minister, the doctor, and the parent, at the bedrock of society. It has ever been thus.

And on behalf of the government, I welcome the representatives of the Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation to Regina and wish them well in their deliberations.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Davidson Project to Feed the Hungry

Mr. Jess: -- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It pleases me to tell the Assembly about the honourable efforts of certain farmers from Davidson who are creating a pilot project to help feed hungry people in this province. Food will be produced by these farmers and given directly to people who are in need. Again, Mr. Speaker, we see the compassion and determination of the people of this fair province and especially of our farmers.

Elmer Laird, a farmer from Davidson, has donated 35 acres of land to grow over 200 tonnes of high-quality vegetables for the hungry in Saskatchewan. Mr. Laird has decided to engage in this because he was concerned, as we all are, about the fact that here in Saskatchewan we have 43 per cent of the cultivated land and about 4 per cent of all the people in Canada, yet people in our province still go hungry.

Mr. Laird is showing his community and the rest of Saskatchewan that people can make a difference. These 200 tonnes of vegetables will be available to people who otherwise would be hungry. By volunteering his time and energy, Mr. Laird is giving hope to many individuals, not only because they are able to eat healthy food, but also that the people of this province will always help each other.

I am sure that the many people that Elmer Laird will help feed will be very grateful for his generous work. The rest of the province should also recognize his efforts.

The Speaker: -- Order, order. The member's time has expired.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Grow Regina Garden Project

Ms. Crofford: -- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Following along the line of the comments from the member from Redberry, a group of community organizations in Regina with representation from all levels of government, have combined resources to establish a major community garden project. Grow Regina was initiated by the Regina World Food Committee.

The project has acquired two large parcels of land for the use of families and individuals of all ages who do not have access to a garden. Growing fresh food locally as a community is a sustainable activity with benefits to health, education, recreation, agriculture, and the environment. The two land parcels represent about 280 garden plots, and the individuals and the families who live in the immediate area will be given preference for the plots. The first parcel is being leased from the Saskatchewan Property Management Corporation, north of the Red Cross on Broadway Avenue; and the second garden is south of the new Regina & District Food Bank at 2201 1st Avenue.

And it should be known that some of the produce which is grown here will be going directly to the food bank. There'll be educational workshops to teach basic and advanced gardening techniques.

And I think, Mr. Speaker, that these types of community efforts bring people together for a common goal. We wish them good success and a good growing season. Thanks.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Three Sioux Indian Bands form Partnership

Mr. Harper: -- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today I would like the Assembly to join with me in recognizing and congratulating the three Sioux Indian bands in my constituency, the Key, the Cote, and the Keeseekoose, that pledged a tripartite partnership agreement for economic and social development earlier this month.

This historic agreement has come about as a result of the three sharing so much in common. Since they share the same language, culture, heritage, and history, it is believed that a lot more can be achieved through cooperation and working together.

Through this agreement of understanding, the bands will jointly develop a comprehensive economic and social strategy to address many of the concerns that are facing the Canadian first nations. Their language and their culture will be preserved and the members of the band will be given an opportunity to enter into a better quality of life. The three bands will also invest their human and other resources to cooperate and to communicate in the common good of all parties.

This agreement is calling for cooperation in the community-based economic development, health, welfare, sports, recreation, culture, justice, child and family services, as well as education and job skill training.

This agreement was signed by Chief Pat Cote, Chief Albert Musqua, and Chief Dennis O'Soup. And, Mr. Speaker, I would like to congratulate these three bands on their historic initiative and wish them all success.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

New Study on Breast Cancer

Mrs. Teichrob: -- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In recognition of Cancer Month I would like to announce a new study on cancer. The Canadian Cancer Society is recruiting 80,000 women in this province to participate in a groundbreaking new 10-year study on breast cancer. The study is being directed by Dr. Carol Haines who says this will mark the first time ever that the everyday activities of women will be examined to determine if they are associated with breast cancer. A \$90,000 grant from the Max Bell Foundation will help fund the project.

In an attempt to recruit women for the study, elementary school children in eight communities will take home information on the study this month while Regina and Saskatoon will get involved this fall. Women can also become involved by contacting either the cancer society or their local health centre.

Mr. Speaker, we feel it is of utmost importance to do all research necessary to defeat this devastating disease. Through studies such as this we can come closer to the point of finding a cure. Thank you.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

ORAL QUESTIONS

Welfare Numbers

Mr. Britton: -- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, I have a few questions I'd like to ask the Minister of Social Services. Mr. Minister, the other day you suggested that the welfare numbers were levelling off. I suggest to you, sir, that that's not true.

We have learned that the number of people on welfare in Saskatchewan in February grew to 81,652. That's an increase, Mr. Minister, of over a thousand people in January; an increase, Mr. Minister, of over 5,000 in the past three months.

Mr. Minister, this growth has all occurred after the transfer of off-reserve natives. So it's your government that is actually . . . it occurred after, so it's your government that deserves all the credit for these increased numbers.

Mr. Minister, what do you attribute this tremendous increase in the welfare rolls? Why is it happening under an NDP (New Democratic Party) government that promised to eliminate poverty?

Hon. Mr. Pringle: -- Well, Mr. Speaker, let me make it clear that we are still committed to eliminating poverty, and we're working very hard to try to create jobs in a situation where that opposition left this province in such a mess, so we had a major rebuilding job to do.

Mr. Speaker, every month, every single month new families come on assistance as they leave the reserve, new treaty families, and we're responsible right away. Now it's his federal counterparts that are responsible for that.

If you take January and February together in terms of the increase, that is a better situation, those two months together, than it's been in the last five years. So take those two months together. The bottom line is that due to UIC (Unemployment Insurance Commission) changes of your former colleagues in 1993 in the federal offloading and in the new federal budget, is going to create major problems for off-farm income, for people who are going to have their benefits cut in UIC. They're going to create another increase in the case-load because people have to work longer and qualify for fewer benefits.

And I can go over -- as I said the other day -- I'll be happy to go over the projects that are coming on stream across the province in terms of new jobs. I'd be very happy to do that.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Britton: -- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Well, Mr. Minister, before the election your party had the answers to end all of the poverty problems. You had all the answers. Now all you offer is excuses, Mr. Minister. The number of people on welfare in this province continues to rise -- 81,000 people on

welfare.

Mr. Minister, that is equivalent to the entire population of 8 of Saskatchewan's 12 cities -- the equivalent of the population of Estevan, Lloydminster, Melfort, Melville, North Battleford, Swift Current, Weyburn, and Yorkton -- all on welfare, Mr. Minister, under an NDP government that promised to end poverty in your first term.

What is happening? What's happening? Well is it because your government's economic policies, are they failing? Or is there an increase in the amount of abuse in this province? Which one is it, Mr. Minister? Please tell us.

Hon. Mr. Pringle: -- Well let me make it very clear, Mr. Speaker, when we were in opposition we never anticipated the degree of federal offloading that there would be on UIC and treaty families off reserves. How could you anticipate that? That's dumped 10,000 new families onto assistance. Those are the facts and you know that.

What the member should know as well is that across Canada, across Canada, Mr. Speaker, the average assistance case-load has gone up 51 per cent in every other province across Canada. They've gone up 33 per cent in Saskatchewan in the last three years -- we know that -- but they've gone up 51 per cent in every other province.

So we're doing a better job than other provinces, and it's no thanks to you or the Liberals or your federal counterparts from before.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Britton: -- Thank you, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Well, Mr. Minister, we know, we know that the majority of the people in this province don't want a cheque from your department. They don't want a cheque from the provincial government; they don't want a cheque from anyone but an employer. They simply don't. And you can't get a job in NDP Saskatchewan; that's the problem right now. Mr. Speaker, I suggest to you that there's always a few people who will try and take advantage of the system. And judging from these numbers, Mr. Minister, it appears that there's a number of people who are abusing the system, or they can't get a job because of your economic programs.

Just the other day the NDP government in Ontario, they hired 270 investigators to look into the potential abuses of the welfare system -- a move that they feel will save \$100 million. Meanwhile your government, Mr. Minister, has moved exactly in the opposite direction. You're doing away with investigators, cheque pick-up, and direct payment to landlords. You're going the opposite direction.

Mr. Minister, given the sky-rocketing welfare numbers in this province, the high potential for abuse, and the rising costs to taxpayers, what changes are you considering to eliminate welfare abuse?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Mr. Pringle: -- Well, Mr. Speaker, he's playing politics with a very serious issue. I tabled the other day in estimates, a listing of all of the control mechanisms that we've put in place and that we're working very closely with the Provincial Auditor; and read his report as I invited you to the other day. What the people of this province don't want either, is your \$850 million interest payment. That is hand strapping this province; and you know very well, \$15 billion debt.

Let me read you a few examples of jobs that are being created in the last little while -- Balcarres, 23 direct jobs; Biostar, Saskatoon, 30 jobs; Goldenhill Cattle, Viscount, 24 jobs; Alcatel Wire, Weyburn, 10 jobs. I'll give you the list; there are dozens and dozens and dozens of jobs here. We're doing . . . we're working very hard. The chambers of commerce, the business community is optimistic about 1994; the Conference Board of Canada is optimistic about 1994; and the people of Saskatchewan are looking for hope and optimism and leadership. They're not getting it from you or the Liberals. And the federal Liberal budget is going to do more to hurt low income people.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Britton: -- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Well, Mr. Minister, I agree it's becoming a very serious financial problem, not only for the people on welfare but also for the people, the taxpayers, who have to support the system.

On the day you took office there were eight people working for every one person on welfare. Today that ratio is about five people for every one working. Every working person there is one person on welfare. And the welfare numbers just keep going up.

I want to read you . . . In November, 76,000; December, 78,000; January, 80,000; February, 81,000. Now is this what you meant when you said it was levelling off? It's levelling off at 1,000 a month, is that what you're telling us? It's like watching the Telemiracle, it just keeps going higher and higher and higher.

Mr. Minister, the other provinces are moving to eliminate welfare abuse. Other provinces are creating work programs for welfare recipients. When are you going to see some positive welfare reforms in this province, Mr. Minister? When are these numbers going to start going down? That's what we need to know.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Mr. Pringle: -- Well, Mr. Speaker, if he's serious about his concern about low income people and unemployed people I hope you support the last budget, the budget we're debating now, because we've put additional money into the Crown Corporations capital project -- 700 million; 24 million for Saskatchewan Opportunities Corporation

to work with the regional economic development authorities; 330 million to support reforestation; 400 million . . . 4 million for northern economic development. I hope you support these measures. You should have thought, you should have thought when you were building big megaprojects, when you were building up a \$15 billion debt, how you would hamstring future generations in our ability to support small-business people, but we've done that in spite of you.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Health Board Elections

Mr. Boyd: -- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, my questions are for the Minister of Health. Madam Minister, today SUMA (Saskatchewan Urban Municipalities Association) and SARM (Saskatchewan Association of Rural Municipalities) once again called on your government to hold health district board elections this year, at the same time as municipal elections. SARM president, Sinclair Harrison, said, and I quote: The provincial government promised local authority and accountability in health care services. It's time for the provincial government to live up to these commitments and keep its promises.

Madam Minister, will you keep that promise? Will you hold health board elections this October in conjunction with municipal elections?

Hon. Ms. Simard: -- Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. The government is committed to having elections for health district boards. And I might point out, Mr. Speaker, that this has never occurred in the province of Saskatchewan before. The members opposite never had elections for hospital boards. Our government, however, is committed to that and we've written it in legislation. We have committed to it publicly; however, we have always indicated the timing of these board elections is under review. There is a process in place, as I have mentioned repeatedly throughout this province to the press and to other people who have asked, that is reviewing how we proceed to these elections and when we proceed to these elections, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Boyd: -- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, I think what we heard in code was there is not going to be elections this fall.

Madam Minister, in addition to the issues of local authority and accountability, SUMA and SARM say that holding elections this fall would make the most economic sense for the taxpayer of Saskatchewan. SUMA president, Ted Cholod said, and I quote: If the elections are integrated, the additional costs for district health boards would be minimal.

It's difficult to estimate what the cost would be for health district boards to hold their own elections, but we suspect it could be several hundreds of thousands

of dollars. Madam Minister, we all recognize that resources in Saskatchewan are scarce so every possible health care dollar should be spent on service delivery not on administrative costs. You could save, Madam Minister, hundreds of thousands of dollars by holding the elections this fall.

Madam Minister, will you take that opportunity for the people of Saskatchewan -- will you save health district boards hundreds of thousands of dollars by holding election this fall as SUMA and SARM have called for?

Hon. Ms. Simard: -- One of the things the process will review, Mr. Speaker, is the cost of holding elections in the fall or outside of that time period at some other time. The reason why we want to review that is because there are many people who are suggesting to us that these elections should not be held simultaneously because of the fact we have school board elections, municipal elections, and this is another election on top of that.

The suggestion is that they should stand alone on their own and we should concentrate on these elections. Therefore we want to review what the costs are and how we could have an election that may be more cost efficient.

It is also important to note when we're talking about costs, as for example one individual wrote with respect to boards, that the learning . . . the challenge is immense and the learning curve steep. The point has also been made to the government, Mr. Speaker, that these boards have just barely got up and running; are just learning the processes and the administrative aspect of health care. And to throw them into an election in October would not only be disruptive to health reform but it would also undermine much of what they have learned in the past if, for example, new members should be coming on stream. We should use their knowledge that they're gaining over the last few months.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Boyd: -- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Madam Minister, SUMA and SARM don't agree with you. SUMA and SARM say it will cost hundreds of thousands of dollars to hold them outside of the municipal elections this fall. And they represent people all over Saskatchewan, Madam Minister.

Madam Minister, Sinclair Harrison points out that the idea of holding health board elections in conjunction with municipal elections was first proposed by your department, the Saskatchewan Health officials, Madam Minister. This was one of the few good ideas that your officials had in implementing your health care model. And now you're backing away from it, Madam Minister.

Sinclair Harrison says, and I quote: As an interim measure appointed boards made sense, but appointed boards answer to the minister, not to the people in the districts, Madam Minister. The point is that we have

been trying . . . that's the point we've been trying to make for months, Madam Minister. You have the opportunity to give Saskatchewan people a real say in health care reform and save hundreds of thousands of dollars doing it at the same time, Madam Minister.

Will you take that opportunity as the people from SUMA and SARM and people all over Saskatchewan are suggesting, and call for those elections this fall?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Ms. Simard: -- Mr. Speaker, first of all the boards answer to the people in their district. It's written in the legislation that they must represent the interests of all the people in their district. They are held accountable at two public meetings per year and have to provide information and budgets. They are accountable to the people within their district. And there is a massive consultation, there is a massive consultation process going on right now with people in the district.

I want to point out to the member opposite that SAHO, the Saskatchewan Association of Health Organizations, has called on the government to delay elections, and their voice has to also be heard. I also have in my hand just a spattering of editorials throughout this province that urge for more time for health boards. Election of hospital boards may be premature. Here's Swift Current: Delaying health district elections makes good sense -- boards need more time.

So for the members opposite to suggest that there's this overwhelming unanimity in the province that we have to proceed to elections in October, is wrong. Because the issue is open for consultation and debate. We will consult with SARM and SUMA, with SAHO, and the people of Saskatchewan.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

The Speaker: -- Before I accept the next question, I have detected that there's too much interruption, particularly when the answers are given by ministers. And I ask particularly one member on this side to not constantly interrupt. I think he knows who I mean. So please, not so much interruption. Next question.

Funding for Agriculture Emergencies

Mr. McPherson: -- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This question is for the Minister of Agriculture, Mr. Speaker.

Your government has a contingency plan in place for natural disasters such as forest fires but you have nothing to deal with emergency situations suffered by farm families from flooding and excessive rain and snow that damages crops. Every time you are asked about providing agriculture assistance, you ignore your responsibilities and pass the buck on to the federal government.

Mr. Minister, you cannot expect help from Ottawa

when your government has no agriculture plan in place. What are you going to do to address natural emergencies in agriculture?

Hon. Mr. Renaud: -- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the member opposite: as he well knows, Saskatchewan has 40 per cent of the arable land in the country of Canada and 3 per cent of the population, and he expects 3 per cent of the population to protect 40 per cent of the agricultural land in the country.

Meanwhile, the federal Minister of Agriculture says in November that he is going to institute an interest-free cash advance. But now he says no. He also says that he likes the idea of a third line of defence, but where is it?

The federal government has a responsibility to agriculture in this country and we expect them to keep their word on that.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. McPherson: -- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Perhaps the member from Kelsey-Tisdale didn't hear the question was to do with emergency disasters and what his government had plans to do about it.

Mr. Speaker, there are more than 900,000 acres of unharvested grain, tame and wild hay that were flooded and damaged by excessive rain and snow last fall in north-eastern Saskatchewan -- the area of the province where the member is from, in fact.

When farm families hurt, the rural communities and businesses in those communities suffer as well, Mr. Speaker. A study was done in the Preeceville-Sturgis area to see how the 1993 crop year has affected the community services. Among other things, tax arrears have gone up 12 per cent over the previous year.

Ag. Credit Corporation has varying degrees of accounts in arrears, with six out of ten farmers in serious trouble in the north-east -- six out of ten farmers, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Minister, will you admit there is a problem and provide these farm families with emergency assistance?

Hon. Mr. Renaud: -- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Certainly we have concerns. There are certain areas in the province that have some problems and we are pressing the federal Minister of Agriculture to act on those concerns. I wish the member opposite would join with us.

I wonder what his agricultural policy is, Mr. Speaker. I know that the Leader of the Third Party borrowed the Mulroney ag policy in 1991 when she was campaigning for election. I wonder if they still have the federal Mulroney ag policy as their answer to the solution because I think it's the same.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. McPherson: -- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The government appears to not have the agriculture in their heart as much as they claimed they did have before the 1991 election, Mr. Speaker.

The farmers who called us say they do not have enough money this spring to pay their bills, put seed in the ground.

Mr. Minister, one farmer went to his local lending institution for a loan. He has been dealing with this institution since 1973 and has never been late with a payment. His loan was refused. The lender told him, because of the situation in the last two years, they were not prepared to lend him any more money. The banker told the farmer he was not alone in that; there were 35 to 45 farmers in the same position.

If 45 farmers are forced off the land in the Preeceville area, a chain reaction will start which will destroy rural Saskatchewan. Mr. Minister, it's not my job and it's not Ottawa's job, it's your job, and what are you going to do?

Hon. Mr. Renaud: -- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again I want to stress to the member opposite that in Saskatchewan we have over 40 per cent of the arable land and 3 per cent of the population. I don't know what he expects from the province of Saskatchewan. It's a federal issue and we are talking with Mr. Goodale and I wish you would, Mr. Member.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Mr. Renaud: -- The Saskatchewan government has instituted a six-year leaseback program, an ag equity fund. Where is Farm Credit on the six-year leaseback issue? Where is the federal government on this? All I hear from Mr. Goodale is yes, I like the idea of an interest-free cash advance today, but not now. And on the other hand I hear him say I like the idea of a third line of defence. But where is it today? Join with us. Talk to Mr. Goodale and see if we can't get help for the farmers that are in need.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. McPherson: -- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The issue before us is a very serious one. And I would wish the member from Kelsey-Tisdale would be more serious in his answers as the people that we're discussing are from his area of the province, Mr. Speaker.

Small business in rural Saskatchewan is dependent on the agriculture community. Mr. Minister, if the farmers do not have disposable income, these small businesses will suffer.

A local farmer tells us that in the Preeceville-Sturgis area several businesses are feeling the effects of the problem. He gives examples of the co-op association, farm equipment dealers, the Wheat Pool, the UGG (United Grain Growers Limited), credit unions, and grocery stores. Grocery stores alone have recognized a 10 per cent or a 12 per cent decrease over last year. Mr. Minister . . .

The Speaker: -- Order, order. I have a difficult time hearing the member's question from all the interruptions from the members. I wish they would allow the member to ask his question.

Mr. McPherson: -- Mr. Minister, will you recognize the seriousness of the situation, develop a plan that will allow for emergency assistance in the case of natural disasters for the farmers -- the farmers in your area, Mr. Minister?

Hon. Mr. Renaud: -- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the member opposite, I was in Nipawin the other day and I was talking to a group of farmers; they're much more optimistic this year. Certainly there are problem areas.

Prices are better for their commodities. They like the idea of the ag equity fund, Farm Support Review Committee's recommendations to Mr. Goodale, and are hoping that we can have a new program shortly. They like crop insurance changes. They like the idea of the six-year leaseback and many are using it.

Mr. Goodale, I believe, will be in town today. I'm wondering if you could talk to him and ask him if he is concerned with the farmers in this province. Talk to him about the 5 per cent cut to the WGTA (Western Grain Transportation Act). I haven't heard you mention that at all. And how about the interest-free cash advances which I mentioned a little while ago?

Where is Mr. Goodale? Can he come to the aid of Saskatchewan farmers?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Grain Car Shortage

Mr. Martens: -- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My question is for the Minister of Agriculture. Mr. Minister, you may not be aware of this, but farmers in this province are facing three major challenges as they head into spring seeding.

The first concern relates to a severe shortage of railcars for grain transportation. Mr. Minister, the rail companies and the GTA (Grain Transportation Agency) have failed to maintain sufficient number of railcars. As a result, elevators in this province are being congested. Farmers are finding they have more difficulty moving their grain to market. Mr. Minister, this creates a cash flow problem when producers can least afford it.

What actions has your government taken to address this situation? Have you contacted the respective federal authorities to determine the extent of the problem and what they intend to do about it?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Mr. Renaud: -- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the member opposite, yes I have contacted the federal minister in that regards because we do believe that there is a concern. And you are exactly right, Mr.

Member -- what is the federal government doing about it? I don't think anything.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

ORDERS OF THE DAY

WRITTEN QUESTIONS

Hon. Mr. Shillington: -- Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. With respect to questions 46 to 50, I hereby table the answer to all those questions.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

The Speaker: -- Answers to written questions are tabled.

GOVERNMENT ORDERS

ADJOURNED DEBATES

SECOND READINGS

Bill No. 32

The Assembly resumed the adjourned debate on the proposed motion by the Hon. Mr. Shillington that Bill No. 32 -- An Act to amend The Labour Standards Act be now read a second time.

Mr. Toth: -- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, it's indeed a pleasure to stand in this Assembly and to raise some concerns that are being brought to our attention on a daily basis by people across this province regarding Bill No. 32, the amendments to The Labour Standards Act.

Certainly, Mr. Speaker, as the debate has unfolded and as people have become more aware of the legislation and the intent of the legislation, as they've been listening and waiting for the Minister of Labour to come forward with his regulations, Mr. Speaker, the people are becoming more concerned on a daily basis. And we have had calls from all across this province, from people in the business community, people involved in education and health, Mr. Speaker. Even labour groups have been calling with regard to some of the concerns they have.

I think, Mr. Speaker, the major concern that we have is the rate at which this piece of legislation is being forced on the people of Saskatchewan. And it would be appropriate to ask . . . one might ask, why such a rush? Why is there such a rush to push this labour legislation forward, or to change The Labour Standards Act?

Is it because the government wants to get some of these types of legislation out of the way before they get into a year just following or proceeding a provincial election? I would think, Mr. Speaker, that is what the government is trying to do. They want to get some of the pieces of legislation that they know would be quite controversial out of the way well in time or well ahead of the next provincial election so that the electorate

will have some time to sit back and totally forget about what's taken place and how the government has just run roughshod over each and every one of them in their lives on a daily basis.

Mr. Speaker, one has to ask whose support does the government have in pushing these amendments forward? And certainly we're quite well aware of the fact that the business people certainly aren't in support of this legislation. Many business people right across this province have spoken out. Businessmen and women in my area have been raising the matter with me and they've been sending suggestions forward.

(1415)

And we've contacted business people, we've contacted organizations and we have asked them, Mr. Speaker, to not just write us with their concerns, to raise their concerns but to also offer some suggestions. So I would suggest, Mr. Speaker, as we enter this debate and if we get to the point where this government just seems to be bull-headed and moving forward with the legislation and not as the Minister of Health has indicated, pull the legislation as she suggested that we do with the election for health boards, then we will be offering some alternatives.

Now I've heard the Minister of Labour indicate that he may have some amendments to the legislation. Well I think it would be very appropriate if the Minister of Labour would pass forward or send those amendments over and let us see them, in light of the Bill, so that we can discuss it with the Bill.

And the Premier has said, well if we let it go, he'd do it later this day. Well we've heard the Premier make those comments before, Mr. Speaker, and unfortunately every time we turn around and offer the opportunity we have been left in a position where we've been double-crossed and I don't think that's appropriate.

Mr. Speaker, the Saskatchewan Association of Rural Municipalities, SARM, wants a delay in the passage of this Bill, as do the Saskatchewan Urban Municipalities Association, SUMA, and the Saskatchewan Association of Health Organizations, the group that the Minister of Health was talking about today, SAHO. SUMA, SARM, and SAHO represent the single largest employee group in the province of Saskatchewan.

Mr. Speaker, by their own admission, they represent over 40,000 employees across the province of Saskatchewan. Mr. Speaker, they have permanent employees, they have part-time employees, casual employees and seasonal employees. They've inside workers and outside workers, emergency workers. They hire students and have employees near retirement. And they, Mr. Speaker, want the government to slow down.

And it doesn't seem to matter who you talk to out there, and I've talked to some local businesses who

hire individuals on a part-time basis. And the reason that it's a part-time basis is because they have fluctuations in the traffic flow in their businesses, especially businesses of food outlets, Mr. Speaker, where there's a heavy traffic flow during, say, the noon hour and during the supper hour.

And as it is right now, Mr. Speaker, if they bring an employee in, they must pay them three hours, not just for the hour that they may happen to work; they pay them for three hours. And if they're forced to give that employee all the benefits that this piece of legislation is bringing forward, it's going to put them in a position where it becomes a greater financial burden for them.

And, Mr. Speaker, they might be able to continue hiring that employee, provided they can pass the cost on to the consumer and provided that consumer doesn't get turned off and not come and continue to give them their business. So they have to weigh the options.

Mr. Speaker, I think when you look at the concerns that are raised out there by SARM and SUMA . . . And I'd like to give a few quotes. I'd like to quote from the SUMA news conference that was held just recently. And Mr. Ted Cholod, he said, and I quote:

We believe that fast passage of the Bill may instead prove disruptive to workplaces, displacing part-time workers, and intruding on the collective bargaining process. By speeding up the process, we are concerned that the government may do more harm than good.

End quote.

Mr. Cholod, president of SUMA, also asks the government to withdraw Bill 32 and to reintroduce it in the 1995 legislative session, complete with the regulations. Now, Mr. Speaker, I think that would be appropriate.

Mr. Speaker, in the question period today we asked the government or the Minister of Health if indeed the government, as they've been asked by these same groups, would indeed implement health board elections this fall in conjunction with municipal elections. And the Minister of Health said no, we must take the time to review the process. They must review the process -- that's what she said -- before we bring forward the legislation that allows for election of health boards.

Well, Mr. Speaker, if the Minister of Health feels it's time that we must take the time to review the process, and it would appear to me that the fact that the health legislation and the health boards have been in place for somewhat over a year at this time, that it would also be appropriate for the Minister of Labour to take the same recommendation and to listen to the concerns that are being raised by business people, men and women across this province, student groups and organizations, withdraw the legislation, sit down with all these organizations, as he's indicated, go over the piece of legislation, make the changes that would

be appropriate, but also lay out the regulations or the changes that will be coming about through regulation.

Now yesterday in this Assembly the Minister of Labour stood and told us that he would bring forward the regulations if we would allow him to move to committee. And here again I say, what guarantee have we that we are going to see the regulations if we would just move from one process, the democratic process in this House, if we would just move through orders of the day and adjourned debates and move right into committee?

Would the minister guarantee the regulations? I doubt it very much. I'm not even sure if the minister has the regulations ready. Even if he did, would he show them to us? Would he let us know? And the problem we have -- we've raised it before -- is the fact that regulations are given approval by Executive Council. And who is Executive Council? -- that's cabinet. Cabinet makes recommendations and can give approval to regulations, and regulations are made and affect our lives on a daily basis.

And we saw that just recently, last week, the increase in our power bills by 3.8 per cent. Did we have the opportunity to debate it on the floor of this Assembly? Did we have the ability to stand here and speak up on behalf of the taxpayers across this province? No, we didn't. It was just a move by Executive Council. And that's what's going to happen with the regulations regarding The Labour Standards Act.

And that's why we feel it very appropriate that we take the time to bring out some of the concerns, or many of the concerns that are being raised with us on a daily basis. And that we continue to ask the minister and ask the government to come clear with what they are planning on doing through The Labour Standards Act, and not only through the Bill itself and the legislation, but the regulations that they will be implementing at a later date.

Mr. Speaker, I believe this would allow the government an opportunity to further analyse and get feedback, the real feedback that the minister continually tells us he is getting, or even the fact that he tells us that he's been meeting with groups. It would allow him to sit down in a real way, unencumbered, and with concerned groups across this province, and hear their concerns, hear the issues that they're raising, get some real feedback, and then come before this Legislative Assembly. And, Mr. Speaker, we would be more than willing to deal with the legislation in that appropriate fashion. And so we would ask the minister if he would take the time and follow the lead of the Minister of Health, withdraw the Bill, and seek that consultation that he keeps telling us he's doing.

Mr. Speaker, I again refer to Mr. Cholod's remarks, and his concerns and requests were echoed as well by the president of SARM, the new president of SARM, Mr. Sinclair Harrison, and Harvey McLane, executive director of SAHO (Saskatchewan Association of Health Organizations). They as well are worried, Mr.

Speaker, about the collective bargaining process. They do not want to see 20 years of collective bargaining go down the drain.

Another group, Mr. Speaker, that we have to take note of is the Saskatchewan School Trustees' Association. They are also opposed to Bill 32. And, Mr. Speaker, when you realize that they employ between 17 and 18,000 people across this province, you begin to understand why a group such as the SSTA (Saskatchewan School Trustees' Association) would have concerns and would be raising these concerns with us today.

So we see business groups like SARM and SUMA, SAHO, and the Saskatchewan School Trustees' Association have told us that although they do not oppose changing the Act, they are opposed to the specific piece of legislation that has been brought before us.

And the reason they're opposed, Mr. Speaker, is because prior to introduction of the legislation, they were led to believe that there would be a sincere consultative process, that they would have input into the legislation, that the legislation would be very clear, would lay out major guidelines, and that as well the minister . . . they were led to believe that the regulations would also be brought forward so they could see how the regulations correlated with the legislation.

However, to date they are still waiting for that, as we are. And so even though they realize that some changes are needed to The Labour Standards Act to bring it up to date and bring it into the 21st century, Mr. Speaker, they're also concerned with how it has been done and the process that has been accomplished.

They do not want these amendments pushed through the Assembly without any regard to employers' costs and job loss. At the very least, the government should table the regulations and allow for consultation, and then as I've indicated, reintroduce the Bill at a later date after they have indeed taken the time for real, meaningful negotiations and consultation.

I believe, Mr. Speaker, that government members know what kind of restraints organizations represented by SAHO and the SSTA are under; even SARM and SUMA, for that matter.

These organizations, Mr. Speaker, we are all aware of, have had their funding cut and are facing additional costs this year such as -- and I just talked about it a moment ago -- the SaskPower rate hike announced last week. And people are saying, how can we continue to absorb these kinds of increases? How can we absorb the effects of this piece of legislation?

The end result, Mr. Speaker, as we've talked to groups and organizations, is there will be job losses -- job loss, which is inevitable.

And unfortunately when we have students right across

this province who are in the process of getting ready to write final exams and are thinking a month down the road of looking for job opportunities, are going to find that the jobs may not be there unless the government was willing to take a very clear and concerned look and listen very attentively to the concerns of the small-business community across this province that do take the time to hire students, giving them that opportunity to work and that ability to raise some finances so that they can go back and continue their education in the fall.

It seems, Mr. Speaker, the only people supporting Bill 32 are government MLAs (Member of the Legislative Assembly) and the so-called -- I believe the minister called them -- the silent majority that the Labour minister continues to refer to.

I believe, Mr. Speaker, it would be appropriate if the Minister of Labour, I would suggest, would hold this legislation until the silent majority speak up and state their case. But maybe, Mr. Speaker, they'll never get an opportunity or won't take the time because maybe that silent majority is silent because they really aren't there -- that silent majority that the minister continually refers to as being out there supporting them. Maybe they have no case because we really don't have that silent majority there.

Mr. Speaker, I know that the government members have been receiving as many letters on this matter as we have in our office. And since we don't have the ability to have a free discussion in this Assembly and allow members to speak very openly on the concerns raised by their members, it would be interesting to hear what kind of a debate is taking place behind closed doors in the government caucus office, or the government caucus at this time, Mr. Speaker. I'm sure that they're going through some of the major concerns that even were raised when I was part of government and the major debate we had on a daily basis as caucus members.

Mr. Speaker, it seems to me the only letters in support that the government must be getting are no doubt coming from trade unions. It's interesting, Mr. Speaker, to note that even part-time employees are opposed to some of the changes.

And I've talked to individuals. I've talked to women who have part-time jobs, and the reason they've got a part-time job is because they've got family at home and they want to spend time with family and they really don't want to take the time to be involved in a full-time job. And they like the flexibility of part-time work. And they're concerned, Mr. Speaker, because they're not necessarily looking for all the benefits, but they appreciate the additional income that it brings into their household.

Mr. Speaker, we have been receiving letters from those who will suffer from the changes to The Labour Standards Act and I would like to give you a few examples. From Humboldt, Saskatchewan, a graphic artist writes, and I quote:

You people don't seem to get it, that it is difficult as business owners to make a decent living much less to expand. My employee now makes as much as I do with absolutely nothing left. Now you want to make it even tougher with staff benefits for the few times we use extra help. In our case, you're not helping us stay in business at all.

From a businessman in Saskatoon, and I quote:

I have glanced at the proposed Labour Standards Act changes. Please do not proceed. They do not make sense, are not needed, and are unworkable.

From the general manager of a meat plant in Melfort, quote:

Your government keeps telling us to compete globally, export value added products, be efficient, start small businesses, hire people, and on and on. Do you forget, or did you ever know that we, Saskatchewan small business, already operate on an unlevel playing-field and now it will be much worse? Small business is expected to pull us out of this deep depression. Why are you trying to kill it?

(1430)

From The Battlefords Chamber of Commerce, quote:

Additional non-statutory benefits, such as medical benefits, will be difficult to secure and impossible to administrate. Scheduling of part-time workers with an extended notice requirement and seniority-assured work will significantly reduce existing part-time labour force.

A Saskatoon restaurateur says, and I quote:

The changes you intend to make to the labour laws will destroy most small-business restaurants, therefore less jobs, higher unemployment, and more welfare.

Mr. Speaker, this employer makes another strong point, and I quote:

One week notice for work scheduling changes -- what happens when my employees phone in sick 15 minutes before shift start? What do I do? I didn't have a week notice to replace them. My business suffers; my clientele suffers.

From an engineering firm in Prince Albert, and I quote:

As a fairly large employer in Prince Albert, we have always enjoyed a good relationship with our employees by paying them good wages and treating them fairly, not by wielding a big stick. It appears as if the provincial government could learn from this on dealing with employers in the

province as this legislation is guaranteed not to improve relationships or cooperation with business. Without businesses and the profits they make, there will be no need for any legislation as there will be no employees to protect.

Mr. Speaker, I could go on and on quoting from the letters that we have received in our office, reading excerpts, speaking out against the changes that are being proposed through Bill 32, the changes to The Labour Standards Act.

Each and every letter clearly defines problems with this legislation. Almost every letter indicates the legislation will force businesses to lay off part-time workers.

Are the members opposite concerned about jobs in Saskatchewan? Are they truly concerned? Are they concerned about the increase, the major increases we are seeing in the welfare rolls in this province? I think, Mr. Speaker, they should be because their track record is certainly showing it as a dismal failure.

Members opposite should be paying attention to the concerns that are being raised. Do the members opposite really realize that there were fewer people working in Saskatchewan in January than any month since March of 1984 according to Statistics Canada? It's a real fact, Mr. Speaker.

Are the government members and is the minister aware of the fact that there are 12,000 fewer jobs in Saskatchewan than in January of 1991, or are they not concerned? Does it really not bother them? Are the members opposite aware that Saskatchewan's population has fallen to a new 10-year low? And do the members opposite want to further increase our already bloated welfare system?

As my colleague, the member from Wilkie, indicated today, do the members opposite realize that out of the 81,000 individuals on welfare today in Saskatchewan, a great many of them were laid off and can't find jobs? People with jobs are desperately hanging on to them; people without are looking. Many people have come to the point and have quit looking because there's just nothing available and have turned to welfare as an alternative.

If the government does not pull this Bill, the first to suffer, Mr. Speaker, will be our students. Students who are trying to earn enough money to go to university will be out of jobs straight across the province.

The Minister of Education is aware of the amount that university students must raise to go to the facility of their choice next year. She knows, Mr. Speaker, because her funding cuts have forced an increase in tuition. And I find that interesting when the Minister of Education and many of the members opposite were sitting on this side of the House prior to 1991, and they were condemning the former government for holding the line at zero on educational funding. Now they've cut that funding. They were condemning the former

government for the increase in tuition. We don't hear them complaining about tuition fee increases right now.

What they're saying is we may have reached the end of the line -- no more decrease in funding. We may have just found a place where we have balanced off.

But, Mr. Speaker, time will tell. In fact as we got into the debate today and the Minister of Social Services was responding, he was blaming the federal government. Well I think he needs to be concerned because following the Quebec provincial election, the federal government may be taking a serious look at social programs and third-party funding that they are sending across this country. And they indeed might pull some of that funding out of Saskatchewan. And yes, this government must be concerned.

Mr. Speaker, this Bill has serious ramifications. It must be pulled from the order paper and be reintroduced after proper and thorough consultation has occurred.

Mr. Speaker, I would encourage the members opposite to truly consider the detrimental effect this Bill may have on business and other employment rates in Saskatchewan. I would ask all members to take the time to listen to people in their constituencies. Listen to their constituents; listen to the groups and organizations and individuals who are speaking out about this Bill. To listen to their concerns; to raise them with the minister, Mr. Speaker; to ask the minister to slow down.

Let's indeed do that consultation that we've always talked about. Take a very serious look at it and come in with the proper amendments, with the changes in the regulations before us, so that at the end of the day, Mr. Speaker, when the Bill is introduced and finally makes it through this House, that there won't be a person across the province that will not say that we haven't had an opportunity; but that we will have a working relationship with business and employers and employees across this province so we can all work together to develop and build this province so we can go into the 21st century.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Goohsen: -- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is indeed a pleasure today to enter into the debate on Bill No. 32 second reading debates. I'm particularly happy today, Mr. Speaker, to address the issue from two points of view.

First of all, as the critic for Labour, I feel that Labour should be defended to some extent in this Bill and the way it is going to treat people in our province. And with that view, I'm going to try to balance my remarks in my debate, in my contribution, with the view that perhaps both sides have issues that need to be addressed, and that there needs to be a compromise of those ideas if we are to have peace and harmony in our province.

The Minister of Labour has in past suggested that

members of this opposition want to divide the employers and the employees on major issues and cause confrontation. Unfortunately the reality of life is that we are doing no such thing. We are playing our role as an official opposition by trying to point out the shortcomings of the legislation and how it might in fact hurt people, both business and employees. And we do that with all sincerity, Mr. Speaker, knowing that it will be a difficult job, but also knowing that that balance is there and needs to be found.

I want to say that in all of the letters and correspondence we have gotten, I've brought just a handful with me. I've got them with me because I sorted through them earlier today and I brought a few of the more important ones with me. Out of all that were received, I've only had two pieces of material that support the legislation in some way. And the one is a letter, and I think I need to comment on that first in order to bring about some of that balance.

As you are probably aware (and I'm quoting from this letter), some of the business community is opposed to changes to The Labour Standards Act. I believe it is only the unscrupulous employers who are fighting the changes and not the many good employers in this province.

Now this letter came from a Dan Bechtel, I think that's pronounced, and he's the president of the Saskatoon & District Labour Council. And I'm not surprised that some of the labour leaders would view it a positive thing for this legislation to be changed because, after all, they have asked for this for some time. He goes on to describe how many workers he represents and that he feels that the legislation of course is necessary and should be done very quickly. That was the one actually signed letter that I got that favours this legislation outright.

The other piece of paper, Mr. Speaker, that I have that refers to in some degree of support, is from the Leader-Star and it's a story written after interviews with various people. And the name Barb Byers of course is no secret to the people of Saskatchewan in support of the labour movement.

And while she basically says that she supports Bill 32, what she doesn't like -- and this is quite important, I think, to the whole debate -- what she does here is complain very bitterly that the government has now suggested that it might actually take a compromise position that would allow business to continue to operate, as well as labour to be able to get along with business people who employ them.

Now she says here, and I'm presuming that they have direct quotes from her, that, she says, the changes provide an opportunity for employers to weasel out of actually having the Act work.

Now I don't always agree with Barb Byers' point of view, especially her philosophical point of view, but she is not really the kind of person that would make that kind of comment without having studied it and

thought about it. And I'm quite concerned that when even the labour leaders, the most prominent ones in the province, say that this legislation is not going to work, I am quite concerned that maybe, when the business community on their side of the issue have also said that it won't work, maybe the draft itself is faulty.

Maybe the language that was used and the way that this Act has been drawn up cannot work. And maybe then, just maybe, Mr. Minister, you have to go back to the drawing board and tear this thing up and start over and redo it. Because here we have one of the most prominent labour leaders in the province saying that there is an opportunity for people to weasel out of the legislation, in which case why have we gone to all this hassle and trouble?

On the other hand, I have a mountain of letters, and I'll just go through the names of a few people that have sent me letters so that the minister will know that we are not playing silly games with him, that in fact his silent majority, on both sides of the issue, are not silent and they are not a majority.

Letters that I have collected today for this debate include letters from the Saskatchewan business coalition; the regional tourism association; the Saskatchewan School Trustees Association; the Saskatchewan Chamber of Commerce; Price Club; Saskatchewan Construction Association; Beau Manor Motel and Hotel; the Bird Machine Company of Canada; SUMA; SARM; Precision Servicing and Engineering Ltd.; The Battlefords C of C; Thompson's Wheat Limited; McDonalds -- we have from more than one operator-owner of McDonalds franchises.

We have from the Potash Corporation of Saskatchewan -- that was from Rocanville. We have Perry Foster from Saskatoon, an individual very concerned; Anderson's Restaurants -- I don't know how many they've got; Graphic Arts and Printing; and Hunseth Line Construction Corporation. And I ran out of page so I quit there and I figured by the time I talk about all those folks, my time will probably be expired anyway.

So the point that has to be made, Mr. Speaker, is that all of these people have written in opposition to the legislation. And while labour has only been represented by a couple of individuals that have added their thoughts to my pile of information, they both make the same point on one issue, and that is that the legislation is unworkable.

And that's the key to the importance of why we should be here in second reading debate. The minister has suggested we should move on to committee of the whole, but what he is saying then is that all of those people that have taken the position that we have a faulty piece of legislation are wrong and that he is right and they should not be listened to.

(1445)

He tries to tell us in question period and other times

that the regulations that he proposes to set up at a later date and the amendments that he talks about to be brought in during committee of the whole are in fact the same things when in fact we all know they're not. And everybody in this province, including business and labour, knows very well that the regulations and amendments are not the same thing.

And when the minister suggested yesterday that we should go to committee of the whole and talk about this, I was quite ready to call his bluff because I knew very well that he wouldn't have any regulations because they haven't even been discussed with the business community yet. He could have brought in some amendments because the business community has given him a list of what to do, but he could not have brought in the regulations as he promised. It can't happen if you don't have them. And the business community knows very well that they haven't even been decided for individual areas.

So with all of this taken into consideration, it becomes imperative that we hold the minister to the regular normal process of bringing Bills into being. And that of course means that he has to listen to our second reading debate wherein we're going to point out to him the fallacy of his position.

Having said that there are things that need to be considered on both sides of the issue, we now need, Mr. Speaker, to go into more detail on exactly what the problems are.

Now after talking to many, many people, it is clear that these amendments that are proposed in this legislation are faulty. It has not been properly thought through and there was not enough consultation. And I say that in all sincerity, Mr. Speaker, based on the fact that out of all of these piles of letters and communications we have, most people felt that they had not been listened to.

And in the end what will happen is that Saskatchewan people will be hurt rather than to be helped by these changes. And that, Mr. Speaker, is too bad because after having had two and a half years to actually come up with some good ideas, it seems that this government is void of good ideas in the labour area.

Now, Mr. Minister, you can bet that once part-time jobs start disappearing and your job creation record keeps spiralling downward, there will be casualties in the Labour department. Because you're going to say, what we have to do is find a scapegoat for all the mess we've gotten, and so you're going to have to fire some of your officials in order to save your own skin.

And I don't think that's fair. Quite frankly, Mr. Speaker, I think the minister could save all of that hassle by simply tabling, as the president of SUMA has suggested, simply tabling this legislation and taking it into a fall session after a summer of genuine negotiation where they sit down and listen to people.

And I'm suggesting that they should listen to Barb Byers as well as to the head of the Saskatoon District

Labour Council, it was called. They should be listened to as well. The government needs to do their homework. They need to do a lot more studying and they need to do an awful lot more listening.

So rather than have a few people from the Department of Labour fired when this thing is over with, I think it's only fair that the minister reconsider his position and withdraw the legislation.

Now, Minister, while you were travelling all over the province and sending news releases to the whole country touting your new standards for part-time workers . . . which of course I have to admit sounds okay because I would like to see some things done in the legislation to protect part-time workers. In theory to make things better for part-time workers is a good idea, but we have to be careful not to let theory interrupt reality.

Now your legislation won't solve the problem, Mr. Minister, as it stands now, because it doesn't really help the part-time workers. Your legislation didn't even mention job sharing or permanent part-time workers.

Now, Mr. Minister, many people choose to job share or to be permanent part-time rather than full-time. This legislation does not cover that area for those individuals. Instead we could see situations where an employee with seniority can horn in on the time shared with another employee, or a third person can horn in on an individual who works only three days a week, etc.

So, Mr. Minister, did you purposely leave out those who job share and those who choose permanent part time, or did you just forget to address their concerns? And I hope, Minister, that you will consider that possibility, that maybe you've let some people fall through the cracks here.

Now our office, Mr. Speaker, has received calls from individuals in this situation. And, Mr. Minister, I guess I have to ask the question, what do you want us to tell those people when they call in? Are you going to take care of their concerns in regulations or are you not? And we have to know and the people want to know what these regulations will or will not entail. And the workers in this province, as well as business, have a right to know what those regulations are going to be and how they will affect their lives.

Now changes to The Workers' Compensation Act and to The Occupational Health and Safety Act, The Labour Standards Act, and soon The Trade Union Act, Mr. Speaker, have all meant more government control. And, Mr. Minister, it is the small business that creates the majority of new jobs in this province. Yet at every turn you are penalizing small business. Each of these changes have meant more intrusive government and less flexibility for business.

Mr. Minister, do you honestly believe that bigger government and less flexibility is the best way to create jobs in this province? Given the fact that your

government's record of job creation has meant 12,000 less jobs since you were elected, maybe you should take a different approach.

And today, Mr. Speaker, we also heard the figure of 81,000 people on the welfare rolls, which very much dwarfs the 12,000 figure, but it did not include an addition of the 70,000-plus who are presently on unemployment insurance in our province. Now it doesn't matter whose mathematics you use, that's getting to be a pretty high figure for a province the size of Saskatchewan.

I suggest to you, Minister, that you ought to listen more closely to the business people, the business owners, who are making our province more attractive for investors. I believe that you could do that by listening to the point of view of how businesses operate. And if you're to do that through the different regulations, then most certainly you ought to show us what those regulations are and how they're going to work. It is the fear and the uncertainty that worries people the most in our society, especially when you have 150,000 people on some kind of government assistance with no jobs, no future, and no hope of getting a job in the immediate future.

Now, Mr. Minister, there are specifics in this Bill such as the provisions speaking of work scheduling being in a place a week in advance. Mr. Minister, why have you taken a small amount of flexibility away from business, and how are businesses to comply with employees who get sick or injured or happen to have other mishaps that might happen to them?

The legislation, Mr. Speaker, also states that a business is responsible for providing work to employees who become sick or disabled. Now there aren't provisions as to how this may come about. For instance, let's say that a company employees 20 people. One employee over the weekend has too much to drink, drives on the road and rolls his vehicle, and ends up disabled. Are you saying, Minister, that it is the responsibility of his employer to take care of this employee for ever?

Mr. Minister, there is some need for some responsibility to be designated, and your legislation leaves this door wide open. This would place quite a financial burden upon a small-business owner, which in turn could place the remaining 19 employees' jobs in jeopardy if in fact the employer were found to be responsible.

I think, Minister, you can see how quickly you could have something not covered in your legislation that could spiral and mushroom into a very serious situation where an entire small business could become bankrupt and all of the jobs could be lost as a result of not having properly thought about this legislation and not having properly written it up.

I think we need to talk a little bit, Mr. Speaker, about the exact reasons that many of the business people have found that they feel that we need to change this legislation. I just want to quote a little bit here from some of our research:

Background briefing notes on Bill 32 (it says here) -- Take a closer look!

The minimum new labour standards could mean maximum hardship for Saskatchewan's economy and less jobs.

On Friday, March 11, 1994 the NDP government tabled Bill 32 -- an unprecedented set of sweeping amendments to the Saskatchewan Labour Standards Act.

Now we have checked into that, Mr. Speaker, and apparently that is a fact. These measures would be unprecedented in most of North America. That means that we are setting ourselves out not only as leaders, but as being individuals in labour standards.

Now as I've said before in this House, there's nothing wrong with being leaders, and there's certainly some benefit to leading in certain directions. However, leading in the direction that will cost you jobs or seriously impact the economy of the province in a negative way certainly wouldn't be the best way to be a leader. And we cannot allow ourselves to get out of sync with our neighbours in labour legislation or we will all pay the price of a poorer tax base and a poorer business base and a poorer opportunity for workers.

Now it goes on here:

Despite an expensive government ad campaign that says, "we're listening", the business and employer community had NO prior opportunity to review the detailed proposals contained in this legislation. While Labour Minister (and it says his name) and his Deputy Minister . . . held dozens of meetings over the last few months, the Department continues to be vague and elusive regarding the specific contents they had in mind. The mere act of meeting does not count as meaningful "consultation" if the Department does not reveal its detailed intentions and does not really hear our legitimate concerns.

The business community was also never asked for prior input on the design of a so-called cost impact study using highly questionable methods. This Cost Impact study is nothing more than a clever smoke screen which continues to miss several key factors.

And of course that's the Deloitte & Touche impact study that they are referring to; an impact study that in itself, when you read it closely, says that it doesn't cover all of the factors that need to be considered. And the business community is very much worried about that, and I think they have good reason to be.

Now it goes on to say that:

With only a few weeks left before the NDP government attempts to bull-doze passage of Bill 32, the Saskatchewan business community is still trying hard to get the Labour Department

to listen.

Now we had the minister telling us here in this Assembly that he had consulted with everybody; he'd been on a great road show; he had talked to everyone in the province. And yet when he got back here and told us how he'd consulted with everybody, we received this document from the business community, and they're saying that nobody listened to them; that in fact the meetings were one-sided and that they didn't hear the concerns.

And it goes on to say that:

Now we know why the Saskatchewan business was left in the dark until the very last minute.

Bill 32 goes way beyond its stated intent to ensure that labour laws are fair, balanced and up to date. There are many measures in this legislation that business does support -- e.g., additional leave for bereavement of grandparents, several maternity and parental leave provisions, shorter and precise time limits on claims, (and that sort of thing).

Now I think that's important, Mr. Speaker, that the business community has pointed out that they're not totally against the legislation. They've pointed out that there are some things that they themselves recognize needed to be corrected. So they're not saying that labour legislation is totally out of order. What they're saying is that this particular legislation is not well drafted and has not addressed the issues that need to be addressed.

It goes on to say that:

However in many other areas of the legislation, as currently drafted, is:

- technically unworkable;
- will sideswipe and harm more workers than it helps;
- will represent a huge and costly "payroll grab" from employers, beyond fair payment of wages actually worked;
- represents an automatic enrichment for powerful union interests in Saskatchewan, without even having to bargain for it;
- makes Saskatchewan less economically competitive; (and)
- will cost jobs.

(1500)

Now that is a brief summary of some of the things that they saw wrong, and some of the things that they saw that should be done. And there again I say that we are working on an approach to a balance -- a balance that will make this province work both for labour and for management. The business community provides the jobs and the employees do the work that has to be done. Without the two working together, you can have nothing.

This particular document went on to do some outlining of how the Bill is actually going to work. And I think it's important that we take a look at what these folks feel is important that the government hasn't listened to. Because I know the minister is going to start to listen. We have discussed this matter now for some time and I'm pretty sure that he would like to have this session end some time before the middle of July. So having gotten his ear, I think it's time that we put the words into his ear.

We have here a summary of how Bill 32 will cost jobs and create other serious hardships, and these are as follows. And it goes on here:

How will Bill 32 hurt workers?

New provisions to extend mandatory benefits to part-time workers -- including short-term casual, seasonal and student workers (Section 45.1). This goes well beyond the Government's original intent. It is likely to result in less part-time jobs for our youth, sudden removal of existing worker benefits, or less new benefits to be established for other workers. (The insurance industry is also totally confused about how to modify plans to accommodate this pro-rating and how employers will be able to track variability and number of worker hours and number of employees according to regulatory thresholds.)

See, Mr. Speaker, even the small businesses have recognized that workers are going to be hurt in a very direct manner, because the insurance companies that they've talked to are unable to come up with an idea of how to cover the workers. That's a very fundamental problem when you're talking about having part-timers covered by the system in the same time that full-time workers are covered.

And so there needs to be time for the insurance industry to work out a way to make this program work. I'm confident that they can do that, but they can't do it overnight most likely. So we need to have that time to work on this.

It goes on to say that:

It appears that benefits will be mandatory for all employees if even one full-time employee or senior manager receives benefits. Preliminary indications are that Government will apply this provision only to firms with more than 20 workers -- but the definition of "20 workers" does not mean full-time equivalents, but the total number of T4'd workers as they may accumulate in the course of a year. Once again this will cause real confusion in defining eligibility, and may result in down-sizing to get below an arbitrary threshold, artificial company splits, or greater shifting from employee to contractor status.

So here's where some of the confusion begins to set in, Mr. Speaker, with regards to the numbers of workers

that are specified in the legislation. The legislation says 20 workers. If you take it on the surface, that would mean that an awful lot of small businesses wouldn't be counted in. The reality is of course though that it's the number of T4s, which means that if you're in a small business or an industry where you have a turnover of employees on a monthly or bimonthly basis even in some cases, you could soon chalk up 20 T4 slips that have to be issued. You might only have five or 10 full-time employees, but you may have part-timers coming and going, and before very long you're also one of those businesses covered by this legislation.

New definition of "working day" as any period of 24 consecutive hours will take away worker flexibility to alter work patterns (Section 5). For example a worker who begins a 1:00 p.m. shift one day could not start the next shift on the next day before 1:00 p.m. without overtime. This is likely to result in less hours of work.

And I think it's just natural that their point is well taken that most employers then would say, well if you can't work that shift until 1 o'clock, I'll hire your friend over there and he'll come in at 10 in the morning, or 8, and he'll take the whole shift and you lose your chance for a shift that next day.

And I think most workers would like to have that opportunity to be able to keep their jobs and to rotate on the shifts. I know that there are some exceptions to every rule, but I know of a lot of people that work in shift work who have accepted this as a natural part of their life, that they have to work shifts and that they are sometimes inconvenient.

New section requiring that meal breaks must be taken after every five consecutive hours (Section 13.3). This legislative rigidity is unique in Canada and could affect 12 hour and other shifts. Overly rigid regulation of this section will likely lead to extensive short shifting.

Now, Mr. Speaker, in our community we had a situation that pretty near works into this example. We had nurses in our hospital who wanted to work a 12-hour shift because the 8-hour shifts that they had meant that they had to come to work more often in order to get the same number of hours. Many of these nurses lived a long ways away from the hospital and had to commute long distances. They themselves made the proposal to the health board of the day asking if they could have 12-hour shifts so that they could get their hours in with a lot less trips to and from work.

The board agreed, the unions actually agreed to that, and it was set up that way. And those nurses that worked under that program were very happy with it because it served their need in a particular circumstance that would be unusual perhaps for a city of Regina or Saskatoon. But certainly in rural Saskatchewan this is not unusual.

And so I think we need to have that flexibility built

back into the legislation, Mr. Speaker. And without having seen the regulations, we don't know if that's going to be done; without seeing what the amended process is going to be, we also don't know.

The business community is asking that they be shown. I guess they're saying to the minister that they don't quite trust him to do what he says he might do or might not do.

And I'm glad to have him paying such close attention today because this will be good for the business community to know that. They have felt very strongly that the minister hasn't paid close enough attention to them. So knowing that he is observing what's happening today will be of some comfort, I'm sure.

Now the:

New section requiring employers to provide part-timers with automatic seniority rights to get any additional available hours of work (likely for firms over 50 employees) (Section 13.4). This may complicate full-time workers' opportunities for promotion or extra overtime. This is likely to create worker conflict and extensive confusion (not to mention real employer paperwork burden in tracking varying seniority rights for all of the part-time workers).

Can you imagine, Mr. Speaker, having to keep the records of which employee has the most hours in a firm of 50 people or more? I can just see the mountain of paperwork that's going to have to be punched into some computer. You'd likely have to have one full-time person just punching in the hours on a computer alongside each one of the workers on every shift that they do and add it up each day to find out who has the actual seniority.

And then supposing you've got two people, who are good friends, who suddenly decide that they want both to have the same opportunities but one gets ruled out because he's an hour ahead in work time, and first thing you know you're going to have two good friends being good enemies because of a very small variance. Whereas the employer had the opportunity before to straighten that out by an arbitrary decision that you work your shift as you always did before.

I can see all kinds of headaches and problems coming out of this thing. The new section appears to limit employees' ability to bank their vacation pay upon their request, section 33.1. And I think that most people would feel that the government should allow that kind of flexibility in legislation so that people can actually work out their own problems. I'm not that sure, Mr. Speaker, that our world needs to have everything rigidly legislated into an absolute solid black-and-white law where you can or you can't, and it's so hard and fast that no exceptions are allowed to the rule.

Now we have a:

New section insisting that everything in this Act is a minimum standard. This interferes with the free collective bargaining process (Section 72). It precludes the possibility of mutually negotiated and acceptable conditions to help save worker jobs or shift from benefits to higher worker wages. It also automatically ratchets up every existing union agreement in the province and/or makes every current agreement immediately null and void upon Act proclamation.

Mr. Speaker, this is probably one of the most important aspects of this legislation -- is the fact that for people like SUMA who represent all of the cities in our province where thousands of workers are employed, all of those collective bargaining agreements that were made perhaps last fall or last winter or maybe a half or three-quarters of a year ago, automatically, with one fell swoop of the pen, those contracts might all be null and void.

We could end up with half the population of this province without any contracts, and we could end up having the province shut down with a major, massive strike of employees that would legally be entitled to renegotiate and legally entitled to do so because their contract's no longer in existence. And you could have the entire province shut down in a matter of a few days time after the proclamation of this particular legislation. How foolhardy can a government be to take a chance on such an event as this?

Well, Mr. Speaker, that is just a few of the things that they have pointed out with regards to how this new legislation is going to hurt the workers. And I felt that it was important that we outline what's going to happen to the workers because, for the most part, people have been attacking this legislation from the business point of view of how it's going to hurt business. No one has taken the time really to point out where the fault in this legislation is as far as building a job base in our province and as far as creating work for our people. So we need to take a look at that because there is a long list of those things that people out there have been telling us and the government doesn't seem to be listening to.

Of course we have heard some of the things mentioned about how the Act will dramatically increase the business costs and harm Saskatchewan's competitiveness to attract new industries and jobs. In fact, Mr. Speaker, I had a call from a gentleman in Winnipeg who said that he was coming to Saskatchewan to study this new labour law because he represented certain business groups and financial investment groups who in fact were very concerned that they would not be able to come into Saskatchewan to do business if this particular piece of legislation were put into place. Having said that, that alone should be enough to make the minister sit back and think twice about this legislation.

Now I've dealt very briefly with the first three pieces of material that I have available to me here today, Mr. Speaker. And I have 15 more very precise and . . . but

long-winded kind of approaches to what should be done different in knowing that there is that much concern and that much evidence that should be placed into the record. I have talked through our party officials to the minister in charge and we have discussed the very real need to spend a considerable amount of time on this issue to be able to get all of this material onto the record.

Having said that, we had agreed that we would only do this for a certain length of time today so that we can move on to other areas. I think we're going on to discuss health matters, and that's important too. But I don't want anybody to get the idea that because we are leaving this issue today that we are downplaying it or considering it to be over by any means. The debate will go on long and hard, as long as the government does not consider the needs of our workers in this province, as well as the needs of our business people. We've got to make that point; we've got to have the minister reconsider this whole piece of legislation.

And I would encourage him, just before I wrap up, that once again, the best thing to do would be to table the legislation; that doesn't mean necessarily pulling it and throwing it away. There is a process, I understand, where you can table the legislation and leave it sit and not act on it at this time.

You could leave it until next fall and then after consulting all summer long with the business community and our labourers, our workers, and give everybody a fair opportunity to actually express themselves, after that period of time you could have a short fall sitting and bring in legislation that could genuinely help this province to grow and to develop and to prosper. Because, Mr. Speaker, there are so many more things that we can be in this province, and it needs to be said.

So with that, I move that we adjourn debate.

Debate adjourned.

(1515)

The Speaker: -- Order. Why is the member on his feet?

Hon. Mr. Renaud: -- I'd ask leave to introduce guests, Mr. Speaker.

Leave granted.

INTRODUCTION OF GUESTS

Hon. Mr. Renaud: -- It's my privilege today to introduce to you I believe a former seat mate of the Hon. Mr. Speaker, a friend of mine, a former MLA for the Nipawin constituency from 1971 to 1975, Mr. John Comer, is behind the bar on the government side of the House.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Mr. Renaud: -- John happened to be my

room-mate in Saskatoon about a million years ago, in the late 1960s. And I want the Assembly to join with me in welcoming John back to the Assembly today.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

The Speaker: -- I hope members will permit me to also welcome my former seat mate and maybe the Minister of Labour could have a chat with him because John was a model MLA in the legislature.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

COMMITTEE OF FINANCE

General Revenue Fund Health Vote 32

The Chair: -- I will ask the Minister of Health to please introduce the officials who have joined us here today.

Hon. Ms. Simard: -- Thank you very much. Before I introduce the officials, I just want to point out that to my immediate right is the Associate Minister of Health, Mr. Chair.

The officials are, to my immediate left, Mr. Duane Adams, the deputy minister; and to his left is Kathy Langlois, the associate executive director, management support services implementation team. And immediately behind Mr. Adams is Ms. Danni Boyd, the executive director of district support; and to her right is Ms. Glenda Yeates, the associate deputy minister. Behind the Associate Minister of Health is Ms. Lorraine Hill, the senior associate deputy minister. And that's it. Thank you.

Item 1

Mr. Boyd: -- Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Madam Minister, welcome to yourself and to the officials this afternoon. I think we'll probably start by a fairly broad discussion about health care reform and then maybe become a little more specific over time.

I think that probably the topic of this afternoon will be the district health board elections and the need for an immediate call for those elections. Madam Minister. We touched a little bit on it in question period this afternoon and I want to deal with that this afternoon, if you wouldn't mind.

It's becoming increasingly clear, Madam Minister, that your government and your department that you're responsible for seem to have some reluctance in holding those elections as you originally had promised in the fall of '94. And I'm wondering why, Madam Minister, that you would be wanting to back away from that commitment that you gave for holding those elections this fall.

Hon. Ms. Simard: -- I want to point out to the member opposite that the fall of '94 was a date that was put forward as the first possible date. He talks as though we made a commitment that was enshrined in

legislation or enshrined in documentation that said there will be elections in October '94. We talked about how the elections would be conducted. The thinking originally was that the best way would be with municipal elections. That means that the first window would be October '94 and that is how the October '94 date was discussed and used as a possibility.

The government, as I indicated today, is committed to elections. We have never in this province had elections for hospital boards in the past. This is something new. We believe in this process. The people of Saskatchewan indicated to us that they wanted board elections, at least partially elected boards, and we gave them that in the legislation. And we will be moving to elections.

Now as to when we will be moving to elections, I am waiting for recommendations from the Department of Health when we have had the sort of consultations that are necessary to determine a whole range of issues that pertain to these elections. The issues pertaining to these elections are issues of eligibility, criteria -- for example, qualifications of people who run for the boards. And another very important issue that I know the member opposite will be interested in, and that is how the wards are determined. Are they based solely on population, or do we look at a combination of populations and geography?

That issue has not been determined. There are people who are suggesting it should be population based. The argument against that is that if it's solely populated based, smaller communities won't have an adequate say. The legislation does not deal with that specific issue and we want to consult further on that issue, for example, amongst a whole range of other issues.

There is a consultation process that is being put in place and a process to look at a whole number of these issues. The consultation process will include consultations with SARM and SUMA and SAHO and health care organizations and health care stakeholders, as well as the general public throughout the province.

Mr. Boyd: -- Thank you, Madam Minister. I don't think that that's quite good enough, and I don't think the people of Saskatchewan will think it is good enough either.

I think at the time when health care reform was announced by you and your government that you held it out as a carrot to try and get some measure of support for your move towards health care reform. And at that time there was some support for it, admittedly -- no problem at all. And you're correct when you suggest to the people of Saskatchewan that there's never been health board elections before. No one's denying that, Madam Minister. Indeed that is the case.

But it was you and your government who suggested that health care reform would move ahead as quickly as possible and health care reform would be dealt

with in a fashion that would have elections in the fall of 1994. And so it seems to me, Madam Minister, that your reluctance to hold these elections now must be based on something other than a genuine belief that there's a need to hold them off.

Madam Minister, in the press release from SUMA, a joint release from SUMA and SARM today, dated April 6, 1994, they are suggesting that they be held as soon as possible; that they were promised to the people of this province when health care reform started nearly two years ago. And, Madam Minister, surely over the course of that time you realize, must have realized, and your department must have realized and started preparing for the eventuality of those elections.

Right from the day you announced it, I would suggest to you, Madam Minister, that health care reform should have . . . and elections of the board should have been initiated, and initiated immediately so that the people of Saskatchewan knew exactly what they were dealing with. In fact, Madam Minister, I would suggest to you that SAHO is even beginning to be a little bit concerned about this. They're not necessarily saying an election should be backed off; they're saying to us as official opposition, in representations to us and in discussions with them, that the election should be announced as soon as possible. At the very least, at the very least they should be announced as soon as possible so the people of Saskatchewan and the people that are on these boards have an opportunity to deal with that, Madam Minister.

So I think SUMA and SARM are calling for these elections and I think it's important to recognize that the people of Saskatchewan want an opportunity for these elections.

Madam Minister, when you initially started health care reform, you weren't willing to back up on anything. You looked at it and you said that you're going to have these health boards put in place by a certain date and that wasn't going to be discussed any further, that the people darn well better get these health boards in place or your department would set them out themselves, Madam Minister.

And so it seems incredible now, in light of what's happened in the past, that you would be backing away from this promise and this commitment. And I don't think it's good enough for the people of Saskatchewan to do that at this time.

Hon. Ms. Simard: -- Mr. Speaker, here is what SAHO says:

Districts urge delay in board elections. There was agreement among the district health boards, however, that 1994 is too soon for elections as most boards are only now beginning the complex task of reorganizing and integrating their services and administrative structures. Even for those districts where health boards have been in place for a year or more, elections next fall are seen as having the potential to be far more

disruptive than constructive.

So that is SAHO's position with respect to elections. SAHO knows, as well as the people of Saskatchewan, that there is going to be district board elections. Absolutely. That commitment is there and this government will follow through on that commitment.

The issue is, is how do we have these elections and when do we have these elections? And I think it's important to get consultation and input from the general public on those questions, as well as a number of ancillary questions.

And as we go through this process, there are a lot of concerns being raised, as I mentioned in question period and to the press earlier today. However the two main issues are how do we have them and when do we have them? And there will be a consultation process with the public, and hopefully we will be able to come to a conclusion on those issues in the near future.

I do not believe for one moment that SAHO thinks there isn't going to be elections. I don't believe that for one moment. I believe that SAHO believes that the fall of 1994 is premature, as do a number of other people throughout the province. Editorials from **The Four-Town Journal**, for example, which says that it would be premature to have them in 1994; editorials from *Swift Current*, saying it makes good sense to delay elections; editorials from the *Star-Phoenix*, from the *Potashville Miner-Journal* in Esterhazy. I mean, this is . . . people know that this is an issue that needs further consultation and further debate. And some people are actually saying more time is needed, and amongst that is SAHO.

(1530)

I think it's important that we have the debate about whether or not we have these elections with municipal elections or whether we have them separately, and if so, what is the cost, or does having them separately warrant whatever increase in cost there may be.

And what is the increase? I have asked the Department of Health to provide us with that information and to put in place a process, which they've been doing, to have these questions answered and to consult fully with the public. The member opposite . . . and I want to remind him, the issue of the boundaries is important, and how we determine these wards -- population only? -- which would be one of the arguments being put forward. Or do we base it on population and geography?

That's an important issue, and the public will want some input into that. It's not predetermined, but it makes a huge difference as to what sort of say various areas have on these boards. And I want to hear from the member opposite what his opinion is in that regard, as well as hearing from other people in the province. That's why we need this process, to look through these things.

I want to point out that the government is absolutely committed to elections. We have put it in legislation, we are committed, we will be proceeding. However, there's some issues that have to be ironed out.

The boards, I might say -- you said the boards -- we insisted that they get together. The corporations came together in August. However, they didn't necessarily take over until several months later because there was a 120-day period before corporations, other corporations, had to amalgamate. Some of these boards did not really take over completely until late fall or late December or early January. So they have not had a substantial amount of time to do the restructuring that's necessary and to get the pieces in place from their point of view. That's why they are telling us, and members of their community are telling us, they need more time to do the restructuring.

Now as they pointed out in one letter that was sent to the **Leader-Post**, that October '94 seemed a long way off last year. However, there was a delay in getting some of these boards up and running, and we had to put a deadline on it in order to get them in place as quickly as possible. And then after that there was a delay because of corporations taking the 120 days to amalgamate.

And so we are looking at a lot of these boards not really being up and running until the end of '93. So October '94 then becomes a much closer date when, originally, we anticipated more boards would be up and running in the winter of '94. So they make that point.

But there are a whole range of points being made, pros and cons, and I think it's important for the Department of Health to have its consultation with SARM and SUMA and SAHO, which is being put in place, and with the public on these issues. And I'm waiting to hear what their recommendations are.

Mr. Boyd: -- Thank you, Madam Minister. Madam Minister, you make an eloquent argument. Unfortunately I don't think the people of Saskatchewan agree with you on this. You hold up a few editorials and you suggest that this represents people all over Saskatchewan.

Well, Madam Minister, I would remind you that holding up and then suggesting to us that half a dozen editorials -- if you even have that many, which I doubt; sounds like you've got three or four, maybe, editorials from across the province -- represent a huge number of people, and somehow or another the rest of the people that are calling for elections as soon as possible this fall . . . somehow or another don't represent very many people.

Well I remind you, Madam Minister, that SUMA and SARM represent people all over Saskatchewan, elected people all over Saskatchewan, both in terms of rural Saskatchewan and urban Saskatchewan, and they don't agree with you, Madam Minister.

And it seems a little bit odd, Madam Minister, that the only people that seem to have any difficulty with this elections process is SAHO. And who is SAHO made up of, Madam Minister? I think it's important that we recognize who SAHO is made up of. SAHO, as I understand it, is made up of people who are, generally speaking, administrators on these boards right now, CEOs (chief executive officers), chairmen of the boards, that sort of thing, and people who are appointed board members, Madam Minister.

So I ask you a very simple question: is it not simply like me, as an MLA, suggesting to you, I'm a little uncomfortable with this job; I've only been at it a couple of years, Madam Minister; I'm a rookie MLA and maybe we should hold off a general election for a few more years or several more years so I can get a little more acquainted with my job.

Madam Minister, I just don't think people will buy into that argument. I don't think that they believe that democracy should work that way, Madam Minister. I think it's their belief that democracy . . . You are the one that decided, you and your government, that there was going to be democratic reform within the health care field, and now we're seeing that. And we are welcoming the elections of board members, Madam Minister. We're welcoming it. Yes, absolutely. We've welcomed it right from the very beginning. We called for it right from the very beginning, Madam Minister.

And now you are backing away from the process, Madam Minister. And one can only think the reason is quite simple, and it's politics. You're concerned, quite frankly, Madam Minister, that there'll be board member after board member overturned in the elections, and I don't think that you and your government want to see that.

I think you feel you're sort of on the down slide of this health care reform issue and that things are maybe . . . the heat's off a little bit and why do we want to open up the old sores again? Why do we want to bring back these people who have an opportunity to stand on a platform in an election campaign and raise the issues of health care reform and point out all of the problems that there is with health care reform in their respective areas, Madam Minister?

Madam Minister, surely, surely your department has undertaken some initiation of studies or some discussion about health care reform in the elections of these boards right from the very beginning. Or did you enter this without any thought being given to the elections? Did you just think, well it's a few years down the road; we won't worry about it now; it'll go away. Maybe these people will forget about it; maybe we won't have to go through this process.

Surely when you initiated this, Madam Minister . . . Give us some comfort this afternoon in telling us that right from the very beginning you had a commitment to hold these elections and that you were committed to holding them as soon as possible and that you had plans prepared in that regard, Madam Minister.

And I wonder if you could share with us this afternoon what those plans were. Surely you had some kind of plans right from the very beginning. And I wonder if you would care to share those plans with us this afternoon.

Hon. Ms. Simard: -- Mr. Speaker, I want . . . Mr. Chair, rather. I will answer the member's questions. However, before I do that, I'd like to table the document that is the 1994-95 expected Saskatchewan Health payments to health districts for the member's information.

Now with respect to the member's comments. First of all, he says that SARM and SUMA don't mean anything. And I want to say this, Mr. Chair . . .

An Hon. Member: -- I didn't say that. You said that.

Hon. Ms. Simard: -- Those are his words: SARM and SUMA don't mean anything.

I want to say this, Mr. Chair. We believe that SARM and SUMA are important and we will be seeking their advice and consulting with them on this issue. I have told the member opposite there will be a consultation process. Included in that is SARM and SUMA because we are interested in and respect their opinion. So we do want to talk to them about it and I want the record perfectly straight on that.

As I mentioned earlier to the member opposite, we have a commitment to elections. I say this every time I deal with this question in the House. There is a commitment; it is in the legislation. We will be proceeding to elections. We want to know how and when.

And we want to do this right. We want to set up an election process and create the health districts . . . The boundaries have just been determined in August of last summer and, let us remember, that with provincial elections it takes something like a year just to establish constituency boundaries.

Within the context of the health district, we have to establish boundaries. If we rush into it, it will be to the detriment of rural Saskatchewan and the members opposite have to know that. By forcing the process too quickly we may not get the appropriate balance between rural and urban areas of a district. And this is crucial.

I want to repeat that: we need an appropriate rural/urban balance. It is one of the issues that will be discussed. We need to consult with people on that, and we don't want to rush the process because I believe if we do that, it will be to the detriment of the member from Kindersley and the member from Maple Creek's constituents, the rural constituents.

It's important for us to make sure that smaller communities are not disadvantaged in this process. And that's why we want to go out and consult. We want to inform people what the problems are, talk

about them and get some feedback. And we're doing that; we're putting that consultation process in place.

And it will be . . . I know that right now the member opposite wants to make some political mileage on this; but in retrospect, when it is all finished, he will appreciate the fact that we have taken the time to do it right.

Mr. Boyd: -- Madam Minister, I don't think you're looking for my appreciation one little bit. I think what you're looking for is some kind of justification for what your actions . . . or inaction of your department is. And I'm not going to give you that this afternoon, Madam Minister.

I think the people of Saskatchewan and particularly groups like SUMA and SARM are right. And I can't help but suggest, Madam Minister, they believe that it's going to be a very, very costly exercise if you move outside of the process that was initially agreed to, Madam Minister.

They're suggesting that it could cost in the neighbourhood of hundreds of thousands of dollars if health care reform . . . health board elections are delayed, Madam Minister. And they're saying that, Madam Minister; we're not saying that. These people have looked at it and they believe that the most cost-effective way of dealing with this is to hold them with municipal elections this fall. And they are convinced that that's the case, Madam Minister. Integrating the elections, they also believe, will lead to a higher voter turnout for these health board elections.

Madam Minister, can you give us some kind of an indication of a figure that your government or your department has worked up with respect to the cost of holding these elections outside of the municipal process this fall?

Hon. Ms. Simard: -- I have asked the department to do that, and as soon as we have that information . . . because it involves exploring options as to how the elections would be conducted. It isn't just a question of coming up with a figure; we have to look at options as to how we would do it and how the lists would be compiled. And once that has been explored, we will provide you and the public with the information.

And in response to the member's comment about we're not looking for his appreciation, I simply want to say this. Not in my wildest dreams would I expect any appreciation from the members opposite. However, my comment is this: is that if we do take the time to get the appropriate rural and urban mix and do what has to be done to achieve that, I believe that the people in your area will appreciate what we've done.

Mr. Boyd: -- Madam Minister, what they will appreciate and what I've spoken to them about and what I've spoken to most of the members on the health board in my area is, is they would appreciate an opportunity to go before the electorate to see whether or not they're doing a good job in the view of that electorate, Madam Minister. They believe that

holding these elections, and people all over Saskatchewan believe that holding these elections is important. It was held out, as I said earlier, as a carrot to try and get some support, some degree, some measure of support, for your elective process. And now, Madam Minister, you seem to have all of these vast concerns about wards and eligibility and all of those kinds of things, Madam Minister.

At the time, a couple of years ago, it didn't seem to be an issue -- didn't seem to be an issue. You and your department were extremely confident that you were going to be able to put this thing together by '94. I remember at the time the discussion was of that nature, Madam Minister, that you would be able to and your department would be able to put these things together and it would all be dealt with, and the people don't have to have any fears; that there would be elections and they'd be scheduled and everybody would know where they stand; and away we'd go and we'd have these elections, and everything would be fine and dandy. But, Madam Minister, that doesn't seem to be the case any more, does it?

(1545)

You and your department have dithered over this for a couple of years now, haven't been able to come up with any kind of concrete solution as to what you're going to do. And now, Madam Minister, you're saying to us, hold off a little bit, give us a little time, we're working through the process, we're going to figure this out, we're going to do it right.

Well, Madam Minister, you've had two years to do it right and you haven't done it yet, and you're still asking for additional time; while at the same time all of that discussion was going on, you were closing hospitals all over Saskatchewan. And you weren't giving them one moment's grace, Madam Minister -- not one moment's grace were you providing to any of those folks out there. And yet when it comes time to do the process that you promised, you somehow or another feel that the province should give you time, Madam Minister.

I don't think that's acceptable, and I don't think SUMA . . . and I think SUMA and SARM and other groups around the province agree with us, Madam Minister. I think they believe that these elections should be held and your department should be moving as quickly as possible.

Can you tell us what kinds of preparations you've made, what kinds of preparations to date that you've made? I'd be happy if you'd table any of the kind of information that you have with respect to wards and eligibility, and all of those kinds of things.

You and your department have been sitting around, Madam Minister, for the last two years, the last two years, doing virtually nothing with respect to this, I would suggest, and now you all of a sudden realize that the fall of '94 has crept up on you a little faster than you've anticipated. And now the people are starting to call for these things, and you're saying: oh,

wait, wait, everybody out there, we're not ready for them.

Well what have you been doing for the last two years, Madam Minister?

Hon. Ms. Simard: -- Mr. Chair, I want to point this out with respect to the member opposite. This year, last time, he said this district board legislation would pass over his dead body, or words to that effect. He fought it tooth and nail. They did not want districts. They were opposed to health reform. And now he's saying, well you can't get this up and running fast enough for us. Well they're opposition. The members opposite are opposition. It doesn't matter what the government does; it's not going to be correct and they're going to look for problems.

Now we allowed the people in Saskatchewan, unlike Tory Alberta and New Brunswick, we let people define their own district boundaries. They came together in groups and they determined the boundaries. New Brunswick came in and simply imposed a blueprint on the province, wiped out boards overnight, and put in new boards and defined it for everyone.

We launched ourself on a massive consultation process and we tabled the district board . . . the vision paper about a year and a half ago. Then we travelled the province and worked with groups to try and get boards established, which didn't come along as quickly as we thought, so we imposed a deadline. Because people were saying, impose a deadline; otherwise it's not going to get done. That deadline was August '93; August 17, '93. And since then the boards have been working at getting corporations amalgamated and put in place.

Health reform in Saskatchewan, given the fact that we have had a community development and a consultative process in terms of establishing boards and now moving towards elections, has proceeded reasonably quickly, and so will elections. As we can come to elections, we will have them, as the work is done.

The consultation process has been with health care stakeholders, and district boards have been putting their minds to it and we've had a number of consultations with them. There have been discussions as to how they think we should be proceeding and what some of the criteria should be. We have yet to have this consultation with the public at large, and that's the process that's being put in place right now and will take place over the next few months.

And I think that will be a very productive process. Because I want to say this: I want to say that one of the important things about health reform in Saskatchewan, to our way of thinking, has been the massive consultation that has gone on with individuals throughout this province. They told us they wanted elections. They told us a whole number of different things that went into the district board legislation. We consulted with the public, and I think

that's important.

In the legislation we built in at least two public meetings -- and district boards, some of them are having a lot more than two public meetings -- two public meetings with their district to set out their budget, to be accountable to the people, and to give a report on the health status of the people. That's positive. That's good for Saskatchewan; it's good for health care. It's positive.

We're doing that because we believe that by consulting with people and involving people in the process, that we will have a stronger health care system. And people will become more aware of not just better, healthy lifestyles but also how the health care system works, and they'll become a part of the process. And I think that's positive.

When it comes to establishing ward boundaries, we want to take the time . . . and it wasn't appropriate to do that last summer when we were asking the district boards to get established nor in the fall when we were moving to conversions. It's now appropriate for us to have that consultation process. And we're moving quickly to get out to the public and talk to them about this very issue.

But absolutely, the public has to be consulted, along with groups such as SARM and SUMA. And we'll be doing that in the next few weeks.

Mr. Boyd: -- Thank you, Madam Minister. You're indeed correct; you imposed a deadline on people for the formation of the board. Yes, everyone understands that; everyone recognized it at the time. People were calling on delays in the system at that time. No, can't do it; we've got a deadline. The train has left the station, the Premier said. We're not backing up one little bit; the train's on its way. It's down the rails. The people of Saskatchewan are just going to have to live with this thing. We have a commitment to health care reform, and we're going to head it down that track no matter what, Madam Minister. And that was the comments of the Premier of the province of Saskatchewan.

But somehow or another the imposed deadline that you gave the commitment to the people in Saskatchewan for health board elections, somehow or another that doesn't hold water any more, Madam Minister. And you also say now, oh you've absolutely committed to holding these elections -- absolutely committed to holding these elections.

Well why should the people of Saskatchewan believe you, Madam Minister? You promised one thing -- holding the elections -- and now you're saying no, we're not going to hold them. But we're promising, we're promising. Everybody out there in Saskatchewan, don't worry. We're promising that we're going to hold an election some day. We're not going to tell you when, but we'll hold it, we promise. We broke this last one, but don't worry about that. We're promising that we'll hold one coming up.

And it seems to remind me a lot of what your colleague, the Minister of Justice, does. He gets into the House and he puts through legislation. And we promise that we're going to abide by this legislation for judges' salaries; we're going to set this independent commission up, and we promise we'll uphold the legislation. And we're going to bring in the legislation. It will be binding on this government and, wow, everybody in Saskatchewan sits up and takes notice and says yes, that's a good piece of legislation. Take it away from the hands of the politicians and put it in the hands of the bureaucracy and then it'll be dealt with impartially and no one will have to worry and everything will be right.

But what happened, Madam Minister? He broke his promise. The Minister of Justice, the highest official in the judicial department in the province of Saskatchewan, broke his promise. And now he's saying well we have a reason to break our promise.

But somehow or another, Madam Minister, the people of Saskatchewan are growing a little tired of you and your excuses. On one hand, you promise it, and on the other hand, you take it away. You take it away from farmers. You take it away from civil servants. You take it away from the judges. And now you're taking away the optioning for elections, even though you promised it.

And now you're standing up and you're saying we have a commitment, an absolute, solemn commitment to the people of Saskatchewan that we are going to go ahead with these health board elections. And, Madam Minister, I think that promise rings hollow.

And I think the people of Saskatchewan agree me that that message rings hollow, that promise rings hollow. Because your past action and inaction shows the people of Saskatchewan exactly what your commitment is to this health care reform and to the election of the district boards, Madam Minister.

Madam Minister, you never answered the question when I asked it before. What preparations, what kinds of preparations has your department gone through over the last couple of years to decide on the eligibility for wards . . . or the people that would be eligible to be in these elections and the formation of these district health boards and the wards within them, Madam Minister? What kinds of preparations have you done? Have you done any at all? Or are you just sitting back hoping that this thing's going to go away.

Hon. Ms. Simard: -- The member opposite just gets up and harangues and harangues and harangues on this issue and tries to paint health reform as being partisan. I ask him just to look at the Health payments to health districts. And he should take a look at that information, which shows that areas that he represents have received one of the largest increases in terms of health districts.

And let's just take a look at some of the other increases in health districts. Health reform has been conducted

by the Department of Health in a fair and consistent fashion throughout this province, doing what we believe is the right thing to do, is to try and get the politics out of health care.

The members opposite want to create . . . first of all, last year it was a Donnybrook on the district board legislation. They didn't want it to occur; they didn't want any districts; they hated health reform; it was a total mess. And they did what they could to get that message out. Now that we've got the district board legislation in, after they said for a whole year, slow it down, you're going too fast; now they're saying, go faster, get it done, ram it down people's throats, don't consult. That's what they're saying. Total inconsistency. Total inconsistency.

And what we are trying to achieve with respect to health reform is to put the control of health care in local communities as opposed to all out of Regina, as it is under the old system; to move to more local and community control, and to do it in a fair and consistent fashion throughout the province.

And will the member opposite give us credit for that? Absolutely not. Because it is not in his political interest to do that. Because he wants to politicize the issue, to grandstand, to misrepresent, and to distort the positions of government and the Department of Health. That's what the member opposite wants to do. He does not want to speak the true facts on what is actually happening in health reform.

Saskatchewan, unlike Tory Alberta and unlike New Brunswick, have come forward with a process that is democratic, that involves the people. And we will continue with a democratic process of consultation and district board elections at the appropriate time and in the appropriate manner to ensure for future generations that we have a democratic process in the delivery of health care.

And I hope, I seriously hope that the members opposite, instead of playing petty politics, will participate in developing a high-quality, first-class health care system for their residents and the constituencies that they represent . . .

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Ms. Simard: -- . . . instead of playing politics to the nth degree. They don't care about their own inconsistencies in this. We're asking them to work with their district boards, to work with their populations, to build a strong health care system for their people, instead of trying to destroy it by rushing into a process without having done adequate consultation and without having reviewed all the questions.

Now the Department of Health has looked at alternate forms of having elections. They have explored various possibilities. They have consulted with district boards. They've looked at possible boundaries. There have been a lot of thinking and discussions going on on this topic over the months. The conclusion that they come

to is the most difficult thing to resolve will be how these . . . who is represented by the wards? For example, do you base it only on population or do you take a population and geography mix in order to give smaller communities more representation? And if so, what is the mix?

(1600)

The other issue that has to be determined is with respect to minority groups. Minority groups want a say, such as aboriginal people, on the health boards. How do we make sure they have representation on the health boards if they don't have the population to create a ward, or the geography to create a ward? So they want representation. How do we fit them in the mix?

Do we determine this unilaterally in Regina, which is what the member from Kindersley wants us to do? He wants us to make a decision and unilaterally say it's going to be this. I say we need time to talk to the public. We need to raise these issues with the stakeholders and the organizations concerned and then we will come to a decision and then we will proceed to elections.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Boyd: -- Thank you, Madam Minister. Madam Minister, it all doesn't sound all that believable to me. You seek our thanks on this. Somehow or another we in the opposition are supposed to sit back and say, well thank you very much. You've given the district that I'm from a little bit of an increase in funding and I'm supposed to stand up and say thank you very much.

Well thank you very much for closing the hospital in Eston, Madam Minister. Thank you very much for closing the hospital in Eatonia. Thank you very much for closing the hospital in Dodsland. All in my constituency, Madam Minister. Thanks a lot for that.

And the people in my constituency, I'm sure, Madam Minister, are fully behind me on this when I say thank you for closing those hospitals out there. Big thanks. And then you want the member from Kindersley and the rest of us in the official opposition to stand up and say thanks for closing 52 hospitals around this province.

Well, Madam Minister, we're not going to do it and the people of Saskatchewan, rural Saskatchewan particularly, agree with us. They don't believe you any more, Madam Minister. You make a commitment on one hand -- you stand up and say you're going to have these elections as soon as possible -- and then you break that commitment. You broke your promise, Madam Minister. You did everything in your power to do what you could do to hurt rural Saskatchewan, and now you want our thanks.

Well, Madam Minister, it isn't in the cards. We're not going to give you that thanks. You could hold up these itsy-bitsy little promises of health care increased

funding to our area or any other area in the province, and no one believes you, Madam Minister. You took it away with one hand, and now you dole it out a little bit with the other hand and you think the people of Saskatchewan, and particularly the official opposition, should stand up and clap our hands and say thank you very much, Madam Minister. Well it isn't going to happen.

It isn't going to happen because the people of rural Saskatchewan in the constituencies that we represent say, don't give in one inch to this minister, because she's wrong. She started down the direction of health care reform and she's created nothing but hurt -- nothing but hurt, Madam Minister, in rural Saskatchewan. And the people out there recognize that.

And that's why they're calling for these elections and that's why SUMA and SARM are standing up. And somehow or another you stand up in your place and in your sanctimonious way you suggest that it's only us, only a small little band of 10 opposition members, that are opposed to your health care changes and to not holding the elections as soon as possible.

It's only me. It's only me out there that has this voice in the dark out there that is suggesting that not to hold off these elections. Well SUMA and SARM represent people all over Saskatchewan, Madam Minister, both in terms of urban Saskatchewan and rural Saskatchewan. And they are saying proceed, Madam Minister. They are saying, you've had time; you've sat around and done nothing on this for two years, and now you realized that it's come a lot sooner that you expected.

Madam Minister, what preparations -- again I ask you -- what preparations have you made? You've made none, I would suggest, absolutely none with respect to the eligibility in the wards and all of those kinds of things. And now you're suggesting that we should sit back and wait.

Well, Madam Minister, tell us this afternoon, tell us this afternoon and provide us with some sort of documentation as to what you have actually done with respect to holding these elections.

Hon. Ms. Simard: -- Well it's clear, Mr. Chair, that the members opposite aren't interested in health reform. They are not interested in seeing things done right; they are interested in a political harangue. It's obviously clear.

The member opposite has no interest in creating a high-quality health care system for the people of his district. What he's interested in doing is haranguing and grandstanding and politicizing the issue. He cannot get on with the job. He wants to dwell on the negative and he wants to harangue.

He also . . . obviously we hit a nerve when we spoke to him and pointed out that we have, although there have been very difficult decisions in health reform, we have made our decisions in a fair and consistent

manner and the evidence is there for that. Now he may not have liked the decisions and that's perfectly understandable.

That's his prerogative to choose not to like our decisions, but he wants to dwell on that instead of getting on with the job of building a strong, high-quality health care system for the citizens of his constituency. In other words, he is simply not interested in the process. What he's interested in is in ranting and raving; in political harangues; grandstanding and politicizing it in the hope he's going to ensure his own re-election.

He is not interested in health reform. He knows full well that Alberta is proceeding with health reform and not in the same consultative process as Saskatchewan. He knows that in Alberta the budgets have been reduced much more substantially than they have been in Saskatchewan and how does he explain that to the people across the border? -- that a Tory government moved in and slashed health care by some 27 per cent in some Alberta hospitals. Just slashed it.

In Saskatchewan we saw a 2.5 reduction, a 2.5 reduction and approximately 2.5 or a little less than that this year. Three years, something like 7 per cent, as opposed to 27 per cent in Alberta in one fell swoop in Tory Alberta, your cousins. Your cousins going out and defining the boundaries and telling people: that's it -- no consultation -- hack in a hospital by 27 per cent overnight. Bang.

And you say you have the better method of doing things? I say no. You are not interested in moving this province to a balanced budget situation, which is where we are heading. You don't want that to happen. You're not interested in reforming health in order to improve it for future generations to save medicare for our children and our grandchildren. Because let me tell you, if we don't make changes, we will lose medicare. We must make changes in order to accommodate it and preserve it for future generations.

You don't want to do that because what we see in Tory Alberta is a movement to private hospitals, a movement to private facilities -- that's what you want to do and that's what your argument is all about today.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Boyd: -- Thank you, Madam Minister. Madam Minister, when it comes to grandstanding, I could take a lot of lessons from someone like yourself. And I think most people in Saskatchewan recognize that.

When it comes to grandstanding, there's no one better, with the possible exception of the Premier, than you, Madam Minister, when it comes to that sort of stuff. And you know very well that that's the case. I could take a lot of lessons when it comes to that from you. And, Madam Minister, I sit back and I watch you on a daily basis, and when it comes to handing out political rhetoric, there's hardly anyone better than you.

And you're sitting there, calling us the ones that are grandstanding, Madam Minister. The one that used to bring in case by case things over the years and hold them up and grandstand on every single occasion she could. And it's duly noted by the editorial writers of this province, Madam Minister.

You're not interested in having an election this fall, Madam Minister, because you know very well that health care reform is still a hot issue in most parts of Saskatchewan, Madam Minister. That's the reason.

Let's face it, Madam Minister, the reason you don't want to do this is quite simple. The people out there are not comfortable with health care reform and you know it. And you know that if all of a sudden you have this overwhelming change in the structure of the boards out there, overwhelming outcry of people and overturning board member after board member out there, that it's going to cast a shadow on all the health care reform.

You're going to have people . . . I'll tell you what's going to happen, Madam Minister. You're going to have people standing up on a platform all over Saskatchewan and saying, I'll fight this government tooth and nail, right from now to as long as they are around, Madam Minister. Because they're trying to preserve a little bit of health care for the district that they are wanting to be elected onto the board of.

And you know very well if you have board member after board member go down in elections, that it's going to cast a big, big shadow over you and your department, Madam Minister. And that's the reason. And somehow you think that if you delay it a year, maybe everybody will forget, maybe they won't worry about it, maybe the closed sign on the hospital will fall down and the people out there won't remember it any more, Madam Minister.

Well I don't think it's going to happen. I think the people out there are mad enough that they'll remember this for a long, long time. The party who always held up the promise of health care in this province is now the party that broke that promise, Madam Minister. And the people out there understand that and recognize that.

And somehow or another, I'm supposed to apologize for what happens in Alberta. I'm an elected member in Saskatchewan, represent the Kindersley constituency, and I'm supposed to stand up and apologize for anything that's happening in New Brunswick or one of the Maritime provinces or Alberta. And somehow or another it's all my fault.

Well, Madam Minister, it isn't anything to do with Alberta; we're talking about Saskatchewan today. And I wonder if you could confine your remarks to Saskatchewan. The people are more interested in what you have to say about health care reform in Saskatchewan than trying to justify your actions because of something else that's happening in another jurisdiction, Madam Minister.

Again, again just try and get it on the record this afternoon, Madam Minister, what plans have you made? What plans have you made with respect to wards and eligibility and all of those other important questions that you said were holding you back, Madam Minister? Very simple. I'm just asking you if you could explain to the people of Saskatchewan and provide some kind of documentation to us as the official opposition, as to what plans you've made, if any. And I don't think there are any, and that's why you don't want to say anything about it.

Hon. Ms. Simard: -- Mr. Chair, I don't understand how he would think we've made decisions about these things and then we're going out to consult. There haven't been decisions made. We're going to consult. The decision has been to go and consult. There's been research done, work and discussions, preliminary discussions, but we're going out to consult. So we don't have plans as to exactly what we're going to do.

And I would like to know what the member opposite thinks we should do with respect to wards. Does he think it should be population based, or does he think rural communities should have a larger say? I'd like to know what his opinion is.

Clearly, Mr. Chair, the member opposite is not prepared for estimates. I gave him this answer an hour ago, and I'm still answering the same question. He just wants to engage in a political harangue on this particular issue, and he's not interested in the estimates.

Mr. Boyd: -- I can assure you, Madam Minister, we're both ready and willing and capable of asking questions on estimates. And after we're finished with this topic, we'll get into a line by line on your department.

But, Madam Minister, the important issue at the time, and particularly today in light of the news conference that was held and the press release by SUMA and SARM, the issue that they want to discuss at the moment, Madam Minister, is what you're going to do about elections in Saskatchewan.

Madam Minister, it's a relatively simple thing. They're calling for you to keep your commitment. Will you keep that promise, Madam Minister? Very simple question. You promised an election, you promised an election in the fall of '94. Will you keep that commitment?

Hon. Ms. Simard: -- I've answered the member's question at least 10 times.

Mr. Boyd: -- And the answer is always the same: we're committed to holding an election; trust us; we promise we're going to hold them eventually. That's the commitment.

But it isn't a good enough commitment, Madam Minister. People like farmers out there with GRIP (gross revenue insurance program), and the judges,

and civil servants realize what kind of commitments you people make. You make the commitment and then you don't stand up to it. You don't stand by it, Madam Minister.

And the people of Saskatchewan recognize that. They are saying . . . SUMA and SARM said in their press release, Madam Minister, that it will cost in excess of hundreds of thousands of dollars to hold it outside of the process, Madam Minister. And I'm wondering whether your department has done any preliminary discussions with respect to that. Do you have any idea of what it will cost if you hold these elections outside of the municipal elections this fall?

Hon. Ms. Simard: -- I have also answered that question, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Boyd: -- Madam Minister, I think we need something a little more definitive than saying you're looking at it, you're thinking about it, you're wondering about it, you got your department working on it. We're in estimates now, Madam Minister, and you're asking us to provide you with a budget for the upcoming year. And we're not going to give you the blank cheque unless you can answer the questions, answer the questions with respect to what you're going to do with the money and what it's going to cost to hold these elections.

So, Madam Minister, can you shed a little light on that for the people of Saskatchewan? What are these elections going to cost if it's outside of the process?

(1615)

Hon. Ms. Simard: -- I've answered that question before, Mr. Chair. I told the member that we are looking at options and we're exploring various options. Whatever option is chosen will dictate the cost, and those costs are being analysed.

Mr. Boyd: -- Madam Minister, when will you be able to provide us with that kind of information. Because until you are able to provide us with that kind of information, I don't see why you feel that the official opposition should provide you with a blank cheque with respect to this.

Hon. Ms. Simard: -- We will be testing the options and determining what the cost is. I don't know at this point when that information will be available because we have to have the consultation process that I referred to.

I am informed that it is highly likely that the department will be able to, if the elections are held in '94, '94-95 fiscal year, be absorbed by the Health budget.

Mr. Boyd: -- Would you agree with SUMA then that holding the elections outside of the municipal election process this fall could cost in the neighbourhood of hundreds of thousands of dollars? Madam Minister, would you confirm that? Because that's an estimate that SUMA has worked up and

SARM has worked up. I wonder if you would provide us with any indication, any kind of preliminary indication as if that might be what the cost . . . kind of consequences that we're looking at.

Hon. Ms. Simard: -- We can't confirm the SUMA number at this point. We will be having discussions with them to determine how they calculate that. It also will depend on how they think the elections are being conducted. So it is a question of determining how we do it and then we'll come up with a figure. We can't confirm the SUMA number at this point.

Mr. Boyd: -- Well that's a little bit difficult, Madam Minister. You can't confirm the number. They've worked up . . . they suspect it could be several hundreds of thousands of dollars. And, Madam Minister, I think the people of Saskatchewan would believe that that money would be better spent -- better spent having it in the use of the delivery of health care rather than administrative costs like holding elections.

So it seems that not only is there an argument for holding the elections based on getting accountability and the election process done as soon as possible, there's also an economic argument for this, Madam Minister, that they are suggesting it's going to cost in excess of hundreds of thousands of dollars, Madam Minister.

So we believe, the official opposition believes that spending that money wisely would be a very good thing, rather than spending it outside of the process, outside of the municipal election process, and thereby winding up with taking dollars away from the delivery of health care rather than administrative costs. Would you agree with that assessment?

Hon. Ms. Simard: -- Well, Mr. Chair, I do want to bring this point to the attention of the member. It is better to have the elections when we're ready to have the elections and everyone, including the health boards, are ready to move to elections, rather than having elections when health reform and health boards and communities aren't ready. And that's the determination that we have to make.

It's better, if necessary, to spend additional money, if that's what it takes, and do it right rather than rushing off because the member from Kindersley thinks we should have them in October of '94. So the point is, is to do it right and move to elections as quickly as we can. But let us take the time to do it right.

Mr. Boyd: -- Thank you, Madam Minister. So you're saying to the people of Saskatchewan that it's okay to spend an extra several hundreds of thousands of dollars just because you think that the process is . . . you're concerned that the process isn't being able to be put together right, and it's just me, just the member from Kindersley who wants to rush off and hold these elections.

Well, Madam Minister, that isn't the case. That is not the case, Madam Minister. SUMA and SARM are not

just me. SUMA and SARM represent people from all over Saskatchewan, and they're calling for it, Madam Minister. So it just isn't me. It isn't me. And I wish you would recognize that, Madam Minister, that these people represent people all over Saskatchewan. It isn't just the member from Kindersley or the official opposition; it's other folks that are calling for these elections, Madam Minister.

And they are saying that spending the money outside to hold . . . or to hold elections outside of the municipal elections this fall is wrong, because of an economic argument. That's been your justification, after all, Madam Minister, right from the very beginning for these health care reforms, is because you felt it was necessary to spend the tax dollars in health care more wisely.

And that's a laudable goal, Madam Minister; nothing wrong with that whatsoever, Madam Minister. But somehow or another, when the process catches up on you and you're kind of caught in a situation where you don't like it any more and the elections are upon you or almost upon you, the promise for the elections at least are on you or almost upon you -- that somehow or another it's acceptable to spend, just blow a bunch of money outside of the process.

Madam Minister, do you not think that SUMA and SARM are correct in their assessment that it's going to cost, and cost a lot to hold these things, the elections, outside of the municipal process this fall?

Hon. Ms. Simard: -- Well first of all, no process has been established yet, so nobody knows what the cost is going to be because a process has not been established. And I want to make that point.

With respect to what the member opposite is saying, I want to also make this point. I think we are waiting for . . . The member opposite in his remarks puts all kinds of statements in my mouth -- so you say you're prepared to spend all this money instead of going . . . and that's what you're going to do.

I've said from the beginning -- and this has been an hour and a half now on this one point -- I've said from the beginning that there's a consultation process as to when the elections will be held. In '94 or in '95 or when, and I am waiting to receive recommendations from the Department of Health as a result of that consultation process. So none of this is predetermined. The process of the election is not predetermined; the cost is not predetermined; and when they are going to be held has not been predetermined. There's a process in place and I'm waiting for recommendations.

Mr. Boyd: -- Madam Minister, what we've been attempting to do this afternoon is get some kind of an assurance for the people of Saskatchewan that you are indeed committed to holding these elections, and as soon as possible. And somehow or another you're not willing to keep the promise that . . . and a commitment that you gave to the people of Saskatchewan earlier on, Madam Minister. It was held out simply as a carrot

to try and get people to support health care reform; that you were going to make this system all that more democratic and people would buy into it and la-di-da.

I mean everybody who is . . . you were trying to get them on board because it was a difficult time and we recognize that, Madam Minister, and it was tough for you as the minister. And in order to do this you just throw them out a little bit of a bone and say, well you know, we can make this democratic. And we'll open up the process and you can be part of the process in this grand scheme of health care reform, Madam Minister. But somewhere along the lines it went off the rails, didn't it, Madam Minister?

It went off the rails because you've made commitments on one hand -- you and your government do -- and then you aren't prepared to live up to them on the other hand. Promise anything to try and get it smoothed out. Promise anything to the people of Saskatchewan to try and get them to support your view and then at a later date, when you find out that it may not be possible, you back away from that promise as quickly as possible. Even though, even though, Madam Minister, it might cost more.

And that was the single justification for the whole process in the beginning, was the delivery of health care dollars and trying to make them . . . the system more accountable and trying to make it a better system. That was the whole reason for health care reform was trying to get a better bang for the tax dollars in health care reform. And somehow now that has a whole lot less lustre to the equation than it did at that time, Madam Minister.

And that's why the people of Saskatchewan, and that's why groups like SUMA and SARM, are asking you to live up to your commitment. And that's why, Madam Minister, it's becoming increasingly obvious that you're not prepared to live up to the commitment that you made. And it's becoming increasingly obvious that the Minister of Justice seems to have the same problem with keeping commitments. And the Minister of Agriculture, or the former minister of Agriculture, and the Minister of Justice with respect to civil service contracts. You people don't seem to have any conscience when it comes to keeping the commitments that you make, Madam Minister.

And that's why the people of Saskatchewan are becoming increasingly difficult to deal with for you, Madam Minister. Because on one hand you say something to them and then you take it away on the other hand, Madam Minister. And that's why people are beginning not to trust you, Madam Minister. You said that you weren't going to close hospitals and they closed. You said that you weren't going to hold off on these elections and now you're going to hold off on the elections, Madam Minister. So why should the people of Saskatchewan trust you on this, Madam Minister?

Why should we believe that your commitment to holding these elections is any more stronger today than it was when you initiated health care reform a

couple of years ago?

Hon. Ms. Simard: -- Now I know there's no point in telling the member opposite this, but I'm going to say it once more for the people who may be watching. This government did not say there shall be elections in October 1994. There was a promise to have elections but not a promise to have them in October 1994. There was a discussion about having them with municipal elections and the first window would be October '94. It was talked about, a possibility that we could have them in October '94 and maybe this is when we could have elections.

The promise was to have elections and that promise is there and the government is committed to that promise and we are putting a process in place to move us to that. Unlike the members opposite who were in power for 10 years, who had an opportunity not to destroy health care, which is what they did when they went around and threw out health care dollars indiscriminately and other dollars throughout the province and brought this province to a \$15 billion debt which has financially crippled it. That was their commitment to health care.

They had a commission that they paid some \$1.2 million for, I think -- or was it 1.8; I not sure -- that said divide the province up into regions. And they sat on it and they shelved it because they had no commitment because they didn't have the courage to move forward and do the right thing.

Our government is committed to having elections. We're committed to moving to elections as soon as we are ready to do that -- as soon as district health boards are ready, health care stakeholders are ready, and communities are ready. We want to move to elections.

I don't know at this point when that will be. I have put in place a consultation process which will provide us with recommendations and tell us when it should be.

There are arguments out there that it shouldn't be October '94. Some of those I've shared today in the Legislative Assembly. There are other arguments that there should be. This is what is going to take place in the next few weeks and months -- a debate on when and how.

Now the member opposite of course is either . . . As I say, what he wants to do is say there was a commitment carved in stone, and now you're breaking your commitment. So I know there's no point in telling him what the truth is, because he will want to distort it. But I am telling the people of Saskatchewan that October '94 was perceived as a possibility, but the commitment was not to absolutely have them in October '94, but the commitment was to have elections.

The question becomes, that we have to look at, is when and how. October '94 is the first window. We could have it outside of municipal elections and have it in the spring of '95, or somewhere late '94. But

whenever we are ready, the province is ready, to move towards elections, the government is committed to it, and we will do it.

(1630)

Mr. Boyd: -- Well thank you, Madam Minister. We've gone at this for some time now, and it's becoming increasingly obvious that you don't have a commitment to holding elections this year. You, no question about it, are going to hold consultations, and you're going to dither around with this and string it out as long as possible in hopes that somehow or another the concern and the issue will go away, Madam Minister.

But I can give you the assurance that the people of Saskatchewan are not going to let this thing just die, and SUMA and SARM aren't going to let this thing just die either.

I think they believe that you made a commitment at that time, Madam Minister, to holding the elections as soon as the fall of '94. And now you're backed away from that commitment and you're seeking any kind of justification for it you possibly can. And you stand up in the legislature and say, I don't want to talk about it any more, and the official opposition is supposed to just sit back and accept that somehow or another as an explanation and an argument that we have to live with, Madam Minister.

And I'm saying to you that I don't think people believe that any more. I'm saying they believe that you made a commitment at that time. You made those commitments trying to get people to support your health care initiatives, Madam Minister, knowing full well that you had no intention -- no intention, Madam Minister -- of keeping that commitment because it would be of a political sensitive nature when it comes time for those elections. And I think the people out there recognize that.

And unfortunately, Madam Minister, I think they also recognize that groups like SAHO, when they stand up and say that they don't want elections, represent something -- that they aren't very impartial on this, Madam Minister. They find themselves in a situation where they are on these boards in large measure, Madam Minister. And it's like me standing up, as I've said earlier, as an MLA and saying, I don't want to have elections any more.

Well I don't think the people of Saskatchewan will go along with that, Madam Minister. Democratic reform of the health care system is something that you initiated and you now must live with it, Madam Minister. And I think the people of Saskatchewan are asking you to live up to that commitment.

It's very plain and obvious, Madam Minister, that you have no intention -- absolutely no intention -- of holding those elections at the promised date of 1994 in conjunction with municipal elections, Madam Minister. And now the people of Saskatchewan realize that.

And unfortunately, Madam Minister, they realize as well that you've broken another promise, you and your government. And it's a shameful day, I think, Madam Minister, when the Minister of Health and the Minister of Justice and the Minister of Agriculture and the Minister of Justice on another occasion breaks the very commitments that they make to the people of Saskatchewan, Madam Minister.

And somehow or another the people out there are supposed to appreciate what you've done in health care. And the opposition is supposed to appreciate the changes that you've made and not stand up in any kind, in any form, of opposition to those changes, Madam Minister.

But I'm afraid, Madam Minister, that the people out there don't believe it any more. They don't agree with you. They don't believe what you say, Madam Minister, because you're not trustworthy, Madam Minister. You break your commitments to people, you and your government. And unfortunately that's the circumstance where we find ourselves today, Madam Minister.

Madam Minister, we'll move on now from this argument. We may return to it at a later date, but we'll move on to things of other importance with respect to your very, very important portfolio, Madam Minister. We'll change the direction a little bit and deal with acute care bed levels in Saskatchewan, Madam Minister.

I understand that as recently as October 29 of last year you confirmed that more cuts are planned for acute care bed ratios in Saskatchewan. And, Madam Minister, I wonder if you would care to provide us with information on that; what your plans are with respect to acute care bed levels in the province of Saskatchewan.

Hon. Ms. Simard: -- For the members edification, when he's talking about SAHO being district board members, I wish to also let him know that there are many other people who sit on SAHO. All of the denominational boards have representatives on SAHO. Public health association has a representative on SAHO. Health administrators as an association have representation on SAHO. It's a much broader group than health boards.

And I think the member opposite does them a disservice when he says that it's self-interest and they're only district boards. So I just want to set that record straight, Mr. Chair.

With respect to acute care, the reduction that was announced last year, not this budget -- it's in this budget but it was announced last year; you will recall that we gave a two-year announcement -- was 2.8 per cent, minus 2.8 per cent in the acute care sector. There was an overall increase in the health budget, or a zero ratio, but acute care was reduced by minus 2.8 per cent.

We are in the process of getting plans from district boards because it will vary from district to district as to how this minus 2.8 per cent is absorbed. It will depend on what their long-term care needs are, for example, and what their overall budget is. And how they are going to absorb this is unknown on a district-by-district basis until they've provided us with their plans.

But they will be receiving their overall budget and they will be making decisions as to how they want to move. And at that time we will have more information as to what it means in terms of acute care beds.

Mr. Boyd: -- Madam Minister, you said that there would be further acute care bed reductions at that time, and the cuts to 52 rural hospitals reduced the bed ratio target from 4.2 beds per thousand to about 3.3, I understand. And you said the province's target is about 2.5 to 3 in two more years, upcoming years, Madam Minister.

And so the obvious conclusion is, Madam Minister, that there will be additional facilities in Saskatchewan that will be closed. And I'm wondering if you would care to comment on that and confirm for us this afternoon that indeed the next round of acute care bed-level reductions will result, will result in additional closing of hospitals in Saskatchewan.

Hon. Ms. Simard: -- There is sufficient funding for district boards to be able to keep their facilities open, and in the institutional . . . in the acute care sector, there is sufficient funding to achieve that.

I want to also, however, tell the member opposite that a part of health reform is shifting resources from institutions to community-based and home-based services, and there have been increases provided for community-based and home-based services. And these increases are going to be distributed through a \$10 million rural initiatives fund. The government has established, as you know, a \$10 million rural initiatives fund which will in part be able to provide for more community-based services.

There also was a 7 per cent budget increase to home-based services and a continued full year of funding for health centres which were converted from hospitals in '93-94.

So as we develop community-based services, we have less need for institutional services. And what that mix is and how quickly districts move to providing more services at the community level and in the home is yet to be determined.

Districts will have to provide us with their plans as to how they want to move in this direction and what they think the best procedures is. The fact is, however, is that they have received adequate funding in this budget to continue to operate facilities . . . However, they will be developing community-based services and as we do that there's less reliance on institutional and acute care.

Mr. Boyd: -- Madam Minister, the question's very simple. How many more hospitals in Saskatchewan will close if you reduce the bed level targets to 2.5, which you've suggested you're going to do? It seems simple enough to me, Madam Minister, if the 52 that you closed the door on for acute care bed levels now . . . I think we'll see an additional round of that same thing happening. And I just want your confirmation of it, Madam Minister. How many more hospitals will be changed from what you used to call a hospital to a wellness centre? Or how many will have reduced acute care bed levels to zero in rural Saskatchewan particularly?

Hon. Ms. Simard: -- I think the overall provincial average for acute care bed levels -- the target which, as I said, is flexible -- is somewhere between 2.5 to 3.0 beds per thousand. That's the overall target which, I should suggest, is a target that's being adopted across Canada. But it may not be achieved. Some places have already achieved this target; in fact some places are lower than this target. It may not be achieved everywhere. That is an overall sort of average.

I want to remind the member opposite that what took place in the conversion of hospitals was that acute in-patient care was phased out and the facilities were converted to health centres. Some of them have long-term care; some don't. All of them provide certain basic services. So the hospitals . . . the doors were not closed, the hospitals were changed. Their roles were changed, as we talked about the need to do since we formed government -- the need to change the roles of facilities.

I want to point out to the member again, there is adequate funding to keep facilities open in this budget. District boards will be receiving increased funding for home-based services and community-based services. As we develop better alternate services, there's less need for institutional services.

What does that mean in terms of acute care beds in a district? I can't tell you at this time because it will depend on district to district. I have not yet received plans from the district boards as to what they are going to do in the year to come. Those plans should be forthcoming soon.

The member opposite wants me to make premature statements with respect to what the acute care bed level is going to be in Saskatchewan. I am waiting for district boards to consult with their communities and do this analysis and provide us with a plan. Then we'll have more information for the public. However, in this budget, as I want to reiterate again, there is adequate funding to keep facilities open.

Mr. Boyd: -- Thank you, Madam Minister. According to a recent report from StatsCanada, Saskatchewan residents have longer distances than most Canadians to travel to the nearest hospital. On average, Saskatchewan residents must travel 9 kilometres to the nearest hospital of any kind. Now that means, when they say hospitals of any kind, I'm under the

impression that they mean a wellness centre or some kind of rudimentary health care facilities, Madam Minister.

Only Canadians in three of the four Atlantic provinces have further to go in an emergency. Now if you need a hospital, Madam Minister, that has a wider range of services, particularly specialty services, Saskatchewan residents have an average of 103 kilometres to travel. That's the longest distance for Canadians anywhere except in New Brunswick, Madam Minister.

Statistics for this study were compiled before, Madam Minister, before your cuts of funding to 52 of Saskatchewan's 132 hospitals. With these facilities losing provincial funding for acute care, the average distances to hospitals in this province will inevitably increase, Madam Minister, leaving Saskatchewan people with the greatest distances of any Canadians to travel to receive adequate health care services, Madam Minister.

And given all of that information and that evidence, Madam Minister, how is it possible to say that the people of Saskatchewan, facing these kind of cut-backs that you are imposing on Saskatchewan residents, have an improvement in their health care? How can you say that the people of Saskatchewan have an improved health care system relative to the system they had prior to your health care initiatives?

(1645)

Hon. Ms. Simard: -- I would ask the member to table that report, please, the one that he's referred to. And I'm assuming he'll do that.

An Hon. Member: -- Be very happy to.

Hon. Ms. Simard: -- Yes, okay, he will. Because he's referred to it, he will table it.

The other point I wish to make to the member opposite is in Saskatchewan we have more miles per capita than any other province because of the fact that we have a small population and a large geography. So we have to bear that in mind.

We also have to bear in mind that we have one of the best ambulance systems of any other province. Now it doesn't mean that there can't be improvements or that we shouldn't improve. Obviously we should. But the fact is today in Canada we have one of the best ambulance systems in Saskatchewan.

The distances with respect to how far people have to travel are medically chosen distances. There is advice from medical professionals as to how far they should travel and what's safe and what's appropriate. These aren't just chosen out of the blue.

We also have to be aware that much of what takes place in a hospital takes place in larger centres. Something like half of the admissions in our base hospitals are from outside Regina and Saskatoon. So

rural people have always come to the larger centres to be looked after in hospital.

So there's all these things playing. It isn't as black and white as the member opposite wants to paint the picture. What we have to do . . . And the Department of Health has a rural health advisory committee which is looking at ways to improve services for Saskatchewan people, particularly rural residents. They're looking at what are appropriate times of travel and so on and they're working with the Department of Health and the district boards to put in services that will be high-quality services.

I think it's important to note that 95 per cent of Saskatchewan's population lives within a 30-kilometre radius of a road ambulance site, and that's very substantial. I think Saskatchewan has very good emergency services when you compare Saskatchewan to other jurisdictions. However we still want to work on improving those services, and our district boards are doing that right now. They have ongoing discussions with respect to how we can improve emergency services.

The Department of Health is establishing first-responder systems throughout the province where communities want to participate. We're looking at what sort of enhanced ambulance services have to be put in place -- the additional training of EMTs (emergency medical technicians). We're looking at and graduating this spring, the first class of nurse practitioners in Saskatchewan -- a program that is a first in Canada -- in order to provide more highly experienced health professionals in our communities, particularly in remote rural communities and northern communities.

So there is a lot of work being done in that regard. And I know that as a result of the efforts of the district boards and the communities and the Department of Health, that Saskatchewan people will be looking at a very high-quality emergency service system throughout Saskatchewan.

Mr. Boyd: -- Thank you, Madam Minister. Madam Minister, unfortunately I think the people of Saskatchewan again believe that your words ring hollow. I think they don't agree with you, particularly in 52 communities that I can think of across Saskatchewan, Madam Minister -- small town Saskatchewan -- and in some cases, relatively very vibrant communities, Madam Minister, that feel that your initiatives haven't been right and you left them without the kinds of services that they've grown to expect and enjoy over the course of the years, Madam Minister.

And I think it's becoming increasingly obvious why there is increased speculation that you won't be the Minister of Health much longer, Madam Minister, because of the disaster that this health care initiative has been right from the very beginning, Madam Minister.

They now believe, Madam Minister, that you did this

. . . I don't know for what reasons. Some are political I would suggest, Madam Minister, and some were just I think you just didn't know what you were doing, Madam Minister. And that's unfortunate, that you didn't understand what you were doing to the people of Saskatchewan, Madam Minister, with respect to health care reform. Unfortunately, Madam Minister, I think that's what they are saying.

And the people in the communities that I represent, Madam Minister, said to me that they think that you should resign your portfolio because of what you've done to health care in Saskatchewan, Madam Minister. You went into this with a whole lot of preconceived notions about how wonderful it was going to be, Madam Minister, and it hasn't turned out that way, has it?

You went into this thinking that people would wholeheartedly endorse your drive for health care reform, and unfortunately again it hasn't worked out quite that way, Madam Minister, has it? And they now believe, Madam Minister, that the only way to solve this problem is for you to resign from it and let someone else take over.

The same way that your seat mate, the member from Rosetown-Elrose, resigned . . . or I mean was asked to resign from the portfolio of Agriculture because it was a disaster, unmitigated disaster right from the beginning, Madam Minister. And that's what health care reform has developed into in Saskatchewan unfortunately, Madam Minister.

And it has nothing to do with what anybody over here has to say, Madam Minister. It has a whole lot to do with your attitude in the direction that you've taken with respect to this, Madam Minister. You went into this . . . the Premier said that the train has left the station. There's no way you're going to back up on any of this kind of stuff, Madam Minister. You went into that, into it; you went in and said, health care boards better be set up, or else, and the or else was you'd set them up if they didn't do it willingly, Madam Minister.

And you went into it with a whole bunch of promises to the people of Saskatchewan -- don't worry about your hospital closing; don't worry about anything, reductions in health care services, Madam Minister. And unfortunately, again it hasn't worked out that way.

And we are beginning to see, Madam Minister, every single day, calls coming in to our offices from concerned citizens in the province of Saskatchewan suggesting that the changes have been harmful to them, Madam Minister. And one can only wonder what kind of response you and your department gives to these people when they call in with those kinds of concerns, Madam Minister, when they call in about situations that have happened around Saskatchewan, Madam Minister.

I can think of a situation that happened at a sporting event out in the community that I live in -- in fact I happened to be in attendance at that very event that

evening, Madam Minister. It was a few weeks ago in Eston. There was a provincial final hockey game on and an old fellow who happened to be there from Carlyle watching his son playing that evening walked out after the game was over and suffered, I understand, a very severe heart attack right on the entrance to the facility in Eston, Madam Minister -- suffered a heart attack.

Well fortunately, because there was a sporting event on, the ambulance service was available and they were there and they rushed this man out to the wellness centre in Eston. And fortunately again, there was a doctor present, and he was administered health care services that evening, Madam Minister.

And people are asking what the point is, and I'll tell you what the point is. That doctor called me a couple of days afterwards and he said, it is very, very obvious, Madam Minister, that had services not have been available in that community, that it is absolutely impossible that that man would have lived and survived the trip to Kindersley that he would have had to have made had there not still been some kind of services available in that community, Madam Minister.

And there was something like 750 people in attendance at that game that evening, Madam Minister. And I think they all recognized and thanked the very . . . thanked God that there was some kind of services, some kind of basic services still available in that community. And Madam Minister, that's the concern that's out there.

The people of Saskatchewan believe that you're not committed to providing services on a fair and equitable basis to the people of Saskatchewan, Madam Minister. They don't believe that you are prepared to do what you've promised to do because you haven't kept your commitments in other areas, Madam Minister.

And you may think that this health board election stuff is minor little stuff, and it's an irritant, and it'll go away, and the opposition shouldn't be concerned about it, and neither should SUMA or SARM or anyone else who stands in their place and says that this is a important question.

But it is an important question, Madam Minister. Because on one hand you're asking the people of Saskatchewan to trust you with health care reform. Trust us, you're saying to the people of Saskatchewan; trust us. We're going to do what's in your best interests; we're going to provide adequate health care services. Don't worry, the people that are at these kinds of things in small town Saskatchewan, or in larger communities, or anywhere else for that matter; the health care services are going to be there if needed. That's what you've said right from the very beginning -- don't worry, there'll be health care services there if needed.

But, Madam Minister, when you give a commitment in one area to hold elections and don't keep it, why

should the people believe you in that area, or in the area that you promise with respect to health care services and adequately funding those services, and adequately providing services on an equitable basis? Why should they believe you, Madam Minister? You break commitments all the time, you and your government, and that's why the people of Saskatchewan don't believe you any more, Madam Minister.

And when you say, you stand up and say there's adequate health care dollars in this budget so there won't have to be any more further hospital closures, why should they believe you on that commitment either, Madam Minister?

You provide us with some documentation and say oh yes, there's money available for all of these districts and not to worry. But we heard the same story before, Madam Minister. We heard the same story from you, saying that these people in Saskatchewan were going to be adequately served with health care services, and not to worry, Madam Minister.

But unfortunately that promise has been broken as well, Madam Minister. And it's becoming increasingly obvious that you don't care about this. You don't want to discuss it; you don't like the very thought of people criticizing the process. Madam Minister, you don't like us standing in our place on a daily basis and bringing up the concerns in Saskatchewan.

In fact, when we call your department, in large measure, Madam Minister, your ministry officials are shocked when we bring up these kinds of things, absolutely. They don't want to discuss it. They want it dealt with as quickly as possible; they're scared to death that we'll bring up these kind of issues in the legislature, Madam Minister.

But I can promise you, Madam Minister, that we're going to continue bringing up situations that people bring to our attention on a daily basis in the legislature because it's important. And it's important that health care is provided with adequate funding and the people of Saskatchewan are provided with adequate health care services, Madam Minister.

And we don't think that the opposition should back off on this one little bit, because the people in our constituencies that we represent and represented, and the people in your constituencies that call us on a daily basis, Madam Minister, they say, don't back off on this; don't let this minister change the system until we find ourselves where we're headed, which is a two-tier health care system where if you happen to be fortunate enough to live in the vicinity, the near vicinity of a hospital, that you'll be provided with services. But if you're unfortunate enough to live in a part of Saskatchewan where you are a little more remote, you won't have those kind of services.

And that's what the question is I guess, Madam Minister, is the people in Saskatchewan . . . are the people of Saskatchewan, all parts of Saskatchewan,

going to be adequately served with health care services, Madam Minister? And the answer is no, they don't believe that they are.

Well ask people over on the west side of the province, Madam Minister. You were there. You were there in communities like Eston when there were 1,500 people were there that night, Madam Minister. And they watched you and the minister, your seat mate, laugh at the kinds of concerns they had. Sat there in front of everyone there that evening and laughed. And they thought it was extremely ignorant, Madam Minister, that you wouldn't consider their concerns more than giving it passing comment and laughing and joking with the person that was sitting there that evening, Madam Minister. And they were astounded.

I think a lot of people expected a lot more from you that evening, Madam Minister. They expected you would provide them with answers to their questions, answers to their concerns. But you didn't, Madam Minister. You didn't do it because you don't care, Madam Minister. Unfortunately you don't care about Saskatchewan health care services, and the people out there understand that, Madam Minister.

And that's why, Madam Minister, there's people all over this province believe that you should resign from that portfolio. And that's why there's increasing speculation that the Premier will relieve you of that duty before very long, Madam Minister. There is . . .

The Chair: -- Order, order. Order, order. It being 5 o'clock, the committee will rise, report progress and ask for leave to sit again.

The committee reported progress.

The Assembly adjourned at 5:02 p.m.