

The Assembly met at 1:30 p.m.

Prayers

ROUTINE PROCEEDINGS

PRESENTING PETITIONS

Mr. Osika: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise on behalf of concerned citizens with respect to the increase in crime by young people. I'll read the prayer:

Wherefore your petitioners humbly pray that your Hon. Assembly may be pleased to cause the government to establish a special task force to aid the government in its fight against the escalating problem of youth crime in Saskatchewan, in light of the most recent wave of property crime charges, including car thefts, as well as crimes of violence, including the charge of attempted murder of a police officer; such task force to be comprised of representatives of the RCMP, municipal police forces, community leaders, representatives of the Justice department, youth outreach organizations, and other organizations committed to the fight against youth crime.

And as in duty bound, your petitioners will ever pray.

The signatures on the petition are primarily from the city of Regina, Mr. Speaker.

Ms. Haverstock: — Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Again I rise to present petitions on behalf of concerned citizens of Saskatoon, and I'll read the prayer for the Assembly:

Wherefore your petitioners humbly pray that your Hon. Assembly may be pleased to continue the services of Working for Women in Saskatoon, who have a 16-year history of successfully providing cost-effective, accessible services to women in poverty by reducing their barriers to training and employment.

And as in duty bound, your petitioner will ever pray.

I present this on behalf of various citizens throughout the city of Saskatoon.

Mr. Hillson: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I present a petition signed by citizens from the city of Regina:

Wherefore your petitioners humbly pray that your Hon. Assembly may be pleased to cause the government to establish a special task force to aid the government in its fight against the problem of youth crime in Saskatchewan in light of the most recent wave of property crimes; such task force to be comprised of representatives of the RCMP, municipal police forces, community leaders, representatives of the Justice department, youth outreach organizations, and other organizations committed to the fight against youth crime.

And as in duty bound, your petitioners will ever pray.
Mr. Speaker, I so present.

Mr. McPherson: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise once again to bring forward petitions from all throughout Saskatchewan regarding big game problems. The prayer reads as follows:

Wherefore your petitioner humbly prays that your Hon. Assembly may be pleased to: (1) change the Saskatchewan big game damage compensation program so that it provides more fair and reasonable compensation to farmers and townfolk for commercial crops, hay, silage bales, shrubs and trees which are being destroyed by the overpopulation of deer and other big game, including the elimination of the \$500 deductible; and (2) to take control measures to prevent the overpopulation of deer and other big game from causing this destruction.

And as in duty bound, your petitioner will ever pray.

And the people that have signed these petitions, Mr. Speaker, of course are from the constituency of Wood River, from the communities of Asquith and Lancer. I so present.

Mr. Boyd: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, I'm pleased to present petitions on behalf of Saskatchewan people from all across this province and I'll read the prayer to you:

Wherefore your petitioners humbly pray that your Hon. Assembly may be pleased to reduce the PST by two points to 7 per cent in the 1997 provincial budget, and table a long-term plan for further reductions in the PST in the years ahead.

And as in duty bound, your petitioner will ever pray.

Mr. Speaker, these petitions represent some 4,000 residents of Saskatchewan from all across this province and I'm pleased to present on their behalf today.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Aldridge: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I too rise to present petitions on behalf of people concerned about the province's big game compensation program. And the prayer reads as follows, Mr. Speaker:

Wherefore your petitioner humbly prays that your Hon. Assembly may be pleased to change the Saskatchewan big game damage compensation program so that it provides for more fair and reasonable compensation to farmers and townfolk for commercial crops, stacked hay, silage bales, shrubs and trees which are being destroyed by the overpopulation of deer and other big game, including elimination of the \$500 deductible; and to take control measures to prevent the overpopulation of deer and other big game from causing this destruction.

And as in duty bound, your petitioners will ever pray.

And, Mr. Speaker, these concerns have been brought forward to me from all across the Thunder Creek constituency. I so present.

READING AND RECEIVING PETITIONS

Clerk: — According to order the following petitions have been reviewed, and pursuant to rule 12(7) they are hereby read and received.

Of citizens of the province petitioning the Assembly to ensure that the Department of Education's external music credits policy is not eliminated; and

Of citizens of the province petitioning the Assembly to reduce the PST by 2 points in the 1997 provincial budget; and

Of citizens of the province petitioning the Assembly to establish a task force to aid in the fight against youth crime; and

Of citizens of the province petitioning the Assembly to assist women in poverty by continuing the services of Working for Women in Saskatoon.

NOTICES OF MOTIONS AND QUESTIONS

Mr. Hillson: — Mr. Speaker, I give notice that on day no. 16, I will ask the following question of the Minister of Justice:

How many sentencing circles were held in Saskatchewan in 1996 and where were they held?

I have similar questions for each of the years 1993 to date.

INTRODUCTION OF GUESTS

Hon. Mr. Lingenfelter: — Mr. Speaker, I'm sure I voice the feelings of all members of the Assembly when I rise today to welcome all of our special guests who are here in the House with us today for this most important reading of the budget.

I also, while I'm on my feet, want to introduce a very special group who have travelled a long way — I would like to think, only to be with us for reading of the budget, but for other reasons as well. The UCAZ, or the Urban Council of Association of Zimbabwe, have a special relationship with SUMA (Saskatchewan Urban Municipalities Association) here in the province of Saskatchewan, and they have exchanged delegations between Zimbabwe in Africa and the province of Saskatchewan over the last couple of years.

And I'm pleased today, Mr. Speaker, to introduce councillor C.Z. Tawengwa, who's the president of the UCAZ and is a councillor in the city of Harare in Zimbabwe; Johnson R. Mawere, the executive mayor of the city of Kwekwe; councillor I. Madzima, who is the chairman of the town of Norton and that town council; and also the secretary of the UCAZ, Samson Mombeshora, who is here with us today as well.

And with them and accompanying them, and I think a group who have been in Zimbabwe: Keith Schneider, the executive-director of SUMA — Keith, if you would stand and be recognized; Murray Westby, the president of SUMA; and Mike

Badham, the vice-president of Cities, the Saskatchewan Urban Municipalities Association. And also Mike is, as we all know, a city councillor in the city of Regina.

I'm sure all members will want to wish well our special group here today.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Krawetz: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, I too on behalf of the official opposition, would like to extend a warm welcome to our international guests and to everyone assembled here today, to all our special guests. We would like to welcome them and wish them a very pleasant afternoon. Thank you,

Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Boyd: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We too as well, in the PC caucus, would want to recognize and welcome the guests from the international locations to Saskatchewan. I hope their visit is very pleasant. A good friend of mine, who was employed at SUMA one point, was involved in some discussions that took place over in Africa, and we would certainly want to welcome them to Saskatchewan as well.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Thomson: — Mr. Speaker, I want to join with other members in welcoming all the special guests here today, and in particular to welcome a group of students who have travelled, not nearly as far as the guests from Zimbabwe, but only from Campbell Collegiate in Regina South. This is a group of grade 12 students who are here today to watch the budget, and I know that they will enjoy it. And all members will want to join with us in welcoming them.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Pringle: — Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, being a former debating champ yourself, as was the Premier, I know you will take a great deal of interest in the introductions I have today. Yesterday I talked about the Saskatchewan debating championships that I attended, and I referred to the high quality of debate at those championships, and the pride that all of us have in our young people.

Today some of our young debating champions are present — which is an honour for all of us — and I would like to introduce the five young people, have them stand when I introduce their names, and we'll welcome them when they all stand.

First of all, Tammy Park. I see Tammy there. Tammy is off to Halifax for the Canadian finals and we wish her well; Erin Weir — Erin and Tammy won first place in the team debates; Jennifer Wilson, and these folks are from Regina.

From Saskatoon in the east gallery, I believe, we have Mike Joyce — Mike are you . . . Oh yes, right — and Ryan Androsoff.

Mr. Speaker, these . . . and friends and members, all of us are

proud of our Saskatchewan youth. Our future is in great hands, and I would invite everyone to join me in welcoming our special guests.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

STATEMENTS BY MEMBERS

Hockey Team Heads for Provincial Championships

Mr. Krawetz: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today I rise to acknowledge the accomplishments of a group of young boys from my constituency. Recently, the BIRS Raptors hockey team beat the club from Odessa to capture the provincial Pee Wee C division southern championship. The Raptors will now play for the provincial title against either Avonlea or Luseland.

BIRS Raptors are named for the communities of Buchanan, Invermay, Rama, Ryan, and Sturgis, the home towns of the players. This cooperative approach exemplifies what rural Saskatchewan is all about. The coach and manager for the club are Julius Dziaduck of Buchanan, and Louis Korchinski of Rama.

I'd like all members of this Assembly to join me in congratulating the BIRS Raptors and their success to date and wishing them the best in the provincial finals. But I'll understand if the members representing Avonlea and Luseland do so reluctantly.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Film Industry in Saskatchewan

Mr. Trew: — Mr. Speaker, on Park Street in Regina, in the Provincial Secretary's constituency but close to mine, is a 94,000 sq. ft. sound stage owned by the people of Saskatchewan, managed by SaskFILM, and leased to movie companies in Saskatchewan and across Canada.

There are over 50 production and production service companies in Saskatchewan. They're lined up to do business here, Mr. Speaker, because one of the many new industries booming in Saskatchewan is the film industry.

Last week, for instance, Shaftesbury Films of Toronto and Heartland Pictures of Regina announced a six-film deal worth \$20 million — the films to be based on novels by Saskatchewan writers, my friend, Gail Bowen, and Rob Forsyth. This means jobs, and this highlights Saskatchewan to the world.

Mr. Speaker, the growth in Saskatchewan film is remarkable, from \$5 million in 1991 to over \$26 million last year to a projected \$64 million by the year 2000. The number of jobs in this industry is expected to increase also to nearly 2,000 by the year 2000.

SaskFILM is working together with private companies to build a working film culture that is producing quality films, economic activity, and jobs. The announcement last week is just one example of the great things happening in Saskatchewan — great for our cultural identity, terrific for our economy. Quiet on the set. Action!

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Booming Pork Industry

Mr. Jess: — Mr. Speaker, we are all familiar with the many new and innovative farming methods and technologies that have been diversifying our agricultural economy. Well, Mr. Speaker, pork producing is not new, and certainly it is not revolutionary to the province, yet it is diversifying and helping strengthen our economy.

The hog industry is expanding at an outstanding rate. New operations are merging in the Glenavon and Kipling areas along with the Melfort-Kinistino-Beatty regions, and the Melville areas, which must make the members from Moosomin, Melfort-Tisdale, and Melville very happy.

They are also emerging in the Leroy area, the Neilburg and the Unity areas. Indeed, Mr. Speaker, the hog industry is expanding to cover the province.

The industry has always been part of our agricultural sector, Mr. Speaker, but it has now emerged as one of the world leaders in production. The industry will inject millions of dollars into our economy, which I know all the members of this Assembly are happy to hear.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Renewed Growth in Swift Current

Mr. Wall: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. With this being the first day of spring, a time of renewal and growth, it is with great pride that I have the opportunity to stand here today and present to the members of the Assembly signs that renewal and growth are occurring in the Swift Current constituency and undoubtedly throughout the province.

The Swift Current area experienced tremendous growth in the oil and gas sector. The number of wells drilled increased 50 per cent and the number of licences issued increased by 58 per cent in 1996. In fact, Mr. Speaker, the economy of Swift Current has increased so much that there is a housing problem. Although housing starts doubled in 1996 from 1995, contractors simply cannot meet the demand.

And there is more, Mr. Speaker. Plans are in place for the construction of a \$60 million pasta plant which will certainly benefit the Swift Current community with increased employment and economic returns.

Mr. Speaker, spring is undoubtedly a glorious time of the year with renewed growth and the prospect of a brighter future. As we move from one season to the next, Mr. Speaker, much like the government did in 1991, we move from the bleak and dismal into the bright and optimistic.

I welcomed the new seasons in 1991 and 1995 as much as I welcome the one today. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Signs of Spring

Mr. Van Mulligen: — Mr. Speaker, as we all know, this is the first day of spring. In a few minutes the Minister of Finance will rise in her place to deliver her budget, which undoubtedly will contain good tidings of great joy.

At that moment, Mr. Speaker, the season of new beginnings, the time of new hope, of rebirth, of rejuvenation, will be officially kick-started. When the minister stands, winter is over.

There are, however, other signs of spring. For those with a nose to smell, the mighty Wascana once again has its own sulphurous announcement that the long winter is over. For those with an eye to see and an ear to hear, the joyful sounds of tires spinning in the soft ruts of Regina's melting streets can be heard at any hour. The invasion of magpies, Mr. Speaker, is surely a sign that the annual migration of more desirable songbirds is not far behind.

Speaking of birds, Mr. Speaker, is it too much to hope for a return to the nest in the legislative press gallery of Dale Eisler, the albatross of the Conrad Black empire? The lesser birds in the nest obviously miss his wisdom, his fairness, and his perfect memory of this legislature. He would remember, for instance, as Mark Wyatt does not today, that our current Finance minister, waiting her turn, was preceded by the member from Regina Dewdney. But 1991 was a long time ago, and small birds have short memories.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Canola Biotechnology Relocation

Mr. Koenker: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Saskatchewan's reputation as a world leader in agricultural biotechnology was recently enhanced once again with the Mycogen Corporation, based in San Diego, relocating its canola research and development program to Saskatoon's Innovation research park.

The corporation specializes in genetic engineering and its application to seeds and bio-pesticides.

Mr. Speaker, the Mycogen Corporation's expertise in plant breeding, oil modification, and insect resistance will add to the focus already being shown in these areas of research and will aid in producing new products and technologies for Saskatchewan farmers.

A partnership between Ag-West Biotech and the International Centre for Agricultural Science and Technology will provide half a million dollars of new money for the establishment of a microspore culture lab, a plant breeding complex, and other research facilities.

The relocation of Mycogen Corporation to Saskatchewan illustrates our commitment to research, development, and to the

diversification of our agricultural economy. Providing prairie farmers with up-to-date information and technology will help to maintain Saskatchewan's advantage in this industry and to add to this province's growing leadership in the biotechnology sector.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

ORAL QUESTIONS

Big River Nursery Closure

Ms. Draude: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, in a few minutes the people of Saskatchewan will hear the Minister of Finance bring down the provincial budget and talk about how wonderful her government is performing.

The same cannot be said for the community of Big River who received devastating news on the eve of today's budget. The town was informed that this government will close the oldest tree nursery in the province on March 30. As a result, 16 permanent employees and 100 casual employees will lose their jobs. Most of these employees are women who live in low income families, and they are devastated.

Will the Minister of Labour comment on the fact that this decision is the height of hypocrisy, as it comes only days after this government made a so-called commitment to pay equity and to women?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Mr. Scott: — Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, and I thank the hon. member for the question.

Certainly jobs are very important to us here in Saskatchewan, but unfortunately the Big River nursery was just out of date. In our transfer of seed and seedling production, reforestation efforts, to the forest companies, they did not see fit to continue on with the Big River nursery.

The notice was actually given out last year and formal notice was given over a month ago. We are continuing to work with the people displaced by this exercise and we will continue to work with the people involved to try to find other opportunities for them in the area.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Ms. Draude: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The people of Big River say closing their nursery will have a drastic effect on their town and they feel that the government has bailed out on their community.

They question, and justifiably so, this government's commitment to the northern economic development, and employment in that area. They also question why this government has not negotiated an agreement with the forestry company to buy Saskatchewan seedlings. At present these companies purchase most of their seedlings from British

Columbia.

Mr. Speaker, given the fact that this government has stated time and time again that employment is the number one priority, how can they justify this decision? And will he comment on this, another example, which demonstrates the government's lack of commitment to northern people?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Mr. Scott: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As the hon. member did point out, the production of seedlings in Saskatchewan at the old Big River site is just out of date and not cost-effective. The seedlings were inferior, their survival rate was very low and thus the companies are going to other sources.

Now on the brighter side, we are negotiating and making every effort to find someone to take over both the P.A. (Prince Albert) and the Big River nursery. And we will continue to do this and, as I say, continue to work with the people affected in Big River to provide every opportunity for them in the future.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Ms. Draude: — The Minister of Environment wrote in a letter on December 11 that his government's objective was to find interested parties who would operate and purchase the nursery to grow seedlings or other products that would allow it to continue as a viable operation in Big River. Perhaps the minister would explain to this House why his government has come up empty-handed and as a result failed the community of Big River and the employees of Saskatchewan's oldest nursery?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Mr. Scott: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. And as I indicated, we are still looking at opportunities for other companies to come in and operate the nursery. That is certainly our goal — to produce the seedlings here in Saskatchewan, create the jobs here in Saskatchewan for the Saskatchewan forest industry. And we have not closed the door on this yet. We are still negotiating and have a couple of good leads.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Regina Health District Board

Mr. McLane: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In a recent article in a Regina paper, it paints a very disturbing picture of the Regina Health District Board. This item notes that the Board's policy of maintaining a veil of secrecy around the motions it passes is oddly out of step with the policies of some of our other districts in the province.

Susan Wagner, the chairperson of Saskatoon Health District, says that, most of us who ran for election run on making the process more open; however, the chairman of the Regina board says that's not the way it's going to be done here.

Because there's no specific statute stating what a board must discuss in public, will the Minister of Health explain how he

intends to address this lack of public accountability?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Mr. Cline: — Mr. Speaker, many people have wondered why it is that the Liberal caucus office is paying their leader \$21,000 out of public funds. Many others have wondered why the Liberal leader has been so strangely silent lately. And I think I have the answer. They're paying to keep him quiet.

And I'll tell you why, Mr. Speaker. Because what he says again is different than what the Liberal Party in the legislature says. Because what we believe in, Mr. Speaker, is democratically elected health boards in 30 districts. What the Liberal leader advocates is going back to 450 boards of people hand-picked by him to do all health business in private.

And, Mr. Speaker, Saskatchewan has the most democratic health board process in this country. And, Mr. Speaker, we're going to keep it that way.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. McLane: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We know full well, and so do the people of the province, that the district boards are only a front for the NDP (New Democratic Party) government's reform model, the wellness model.

The people of Saskatchewan, Mr. Speaker, have experienced firsthand in a very real way this government's approach to health care reform. We witness boards that are not accountable to the public. We see boards placing gag orders on health care workers. And worst of all, we see the Minister of Health today defending this attitude.

Mr. Speaker, these actions only serve to further destroy any confidence the people of Saskatchewan have in the present health care system. Will the Minister of Health again — and I ask him once more — will he stand in this House today and take a step toward ensuring that our boards are open and accountable to the very people that elected them and that they serve?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Mr. Romanow: — Mr. Speaker, I'm going to answer this question on behalf of the government, if I might. I want to answer it because the member from Arm River picks up on the theme that the official Leader of the Opposition picked up in his debate on the occasion of the speech throne a few days ago . . . throne speech debate, where the Leader of the Opposition, Liberal Leader of the Opposition said the following about the district health boards: New Democrats have established "puppet district health boards."

And that is the thrust of course, of the member of Arm River's question here, that somehow these are puppet district health boards and that Regina is one of them, that the Minister of Health should tell them.

Mr. Speaker, I want to answer the question very simply this way. It's about time that the Liberal Party of Saskatchewan got

its act together because I would suggest that the president of the Liberal Party of Saskatchewan, one Anita Bergman; the official Leader of the Opposition in this House, the member from Canora; the Liberal leader, Dr. Melenchuk, get together, because as you should know, the president of the Saskatchewan Liberal Party, Ms. Anita Bergman, is on the Regina District Health Board and she is either a puppet or she is not.

Will you stand up on your feet and say that Ms. Bergman is a puppet?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

The Speaker: — Order, order. I am required to remind all those who are visiting the Assembly today that guests are not permitted to participate in the proceedings, and having been advised accordingly, I'm sure everyone will follow the same rules as the members.

Compensation for Parents Affected by Labour Standards

Ms. Julé: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, many parents in the province continue to play a frustrating waiting game, not knowing whether this government will do the honourable thing and provide compensation to those who face substantial bills for back pay for their babysitters. The government took the first step by admitting it was their mistake that created this hardship for parents in the first place.

However, the Minister of Justice has indicated that there is no mechanism to provide compensation. Well, Mr. Speaker, I suggest there is a mechanism. If the government and members opposite would agree to forgo the \$4,200 in additional salary that they collected under the former pay system — something that other members on this side of the House did repay — then the problem could be solved.

So will the minister make a commitment in this House to accept this challenge?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Mr. Mitchell: — Mr. Speaker, this is the third time in the last two weeks that this question has been asked; the second time by this official opposition. And the answer is perfectly well-known to the member, but I'll give it again, slowly, so she can understand it.

We do not have an existing program from which these claims can be paid. We are however, committed through the mouth of the Premier and through the mouth of myself, that we will monitor this situation. We're talking about taxpayers' money here and we're not about to expend taxpayers' money or commit ourselves to spend it until we have a clear idea of the dimensions of the problem.

Now if the member will listen, maybe she won't have to ask this question again.

And when we understand the dimensions of the problem, namely, how many people have had claims made against them and what the settlements have been, and how many people out

there have been complying with the law and would be entitled to similar treatment, then and only then can we make a rational decision on that. Now is that clear?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Provincial Sales Tax

Mr. Boyd: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, I think I'd take the opportunity to ask a question about today's budget and direct my question to the Minister of Finance.

Madam Minister, every day since this session began our members have been tabling petitions from all across the province calling for a reduction in the PST (provincial sales tax). Taxpayers are demanding it, businesses are demanding it, and as you know, Madam Minister, our party's election platform said it was possible even though you said it was not possible.

Madam Minister, are you finally going to listen to the thousands of people who signed our petition, and are you finally going to adopt the PC (Progressive Conservative) taxation policy and cut the PST by 2 points?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Mr. Romanow: — Mr. Speaker, I want to address the latter part of the question first. The answer I can give the hon. member when he asks, will we finally adopt the PC taxation policy and approaches, the answer is unequivocally no, we will not adopt that.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Mr. Romanow: — You'll remember how your taxation policies were: you put on a tax on lotteries, then you took it off and you said there's a tax break. You put on a tax on used cars, then you took it off and you said there was a tax break. You took off the tax on the fuel, put it back on and said, well, we had to do it. In the process you ran up a deficit of \$14 billion.

Now you get up in the legislature and say are we going to adopt your fiscal policies? Nobody in Saskatchewan is going to adopt your fiscal policies.

We have said this since we've been assuming office in 1991. We want to give tax relief, program enhancement, debt reduction, when we can deliver for ever on the interests and on behalf of the people of the province of Saskatchewan. Not the old Tory way for short-term votes, but for the benefit of the quality of life and benefiting all the people of Saskatchewan. That's the NDP Saskatchewan way, not your way.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Video Lottery Terminal Revenues

Mr. Heppner: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, my question is also for the Minister of Finance. Madam Minister, just before the last election you wanted to silence any opposition to your government's expanded gambling policy so

you promised to share 10 per cent of the VLT (video lottery terminal) revenues with municipalities. As soon as the election was over, you promptly broke that promise. Not only that, you cut millions of dollars of revenue-sharing grants.

Madam Minister, you seem to be hinting that your government has a lot of new-found wealth. VLTs are sucking hundreds of millions of dollars a year out of Saskatchewan people. Are you finally going to fulfil your campaign promise and back-fill your cuts to municipalities by giving them 10 per cent of the VLT revenues?

Hon. Mr. Romanow: — Mr. Speaker, again there is a fundamental contradiction which should be addressed someday by the Conservatives; because the Conservatives and that member in particular get up in the legislature daily — or almost daily it seems — and say that the VLT policy, not the VLT policy of revenue sharing, but VLTs and all of it is all wrong. Now he gets up and says, however, maybe it isn't all so wrong. Maybe if there is some money coming out the money should be revenue shared in some form or capacity.

Our position has been that that money should be revenue shared. Our money . . . position is that the 10 per cent should be shared in such a way that the urbans and the rural municipalities and the provincial governments and the SSTA (Saskatchewan School Trustees Association) can agree.

We sat down and negotiated and negotiated and talked and talked and could not find an agreement. In the consequence, the government is moving with respect to 911 and the expenditure of other dollars and other ventures, with respect to that 10 per cent, in order to benefit the people in the province of Saskatchewan.

And finally, on this issue. What are we talking about when we're talking about VLTs? This money does not go into the pocket of the Minister of Municipal Affairs or the pocket of Economic Development or my pocket or your pocket. All of this money goes back to the people of Saskatchewan in benefits — for roads and schools and hospitals and everything else that this budget, in about 10 or 15 minutes, will talk about.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Young Offenders Act

Mr. Toth: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, my question is to the Minister of Justice. Mr. Speaker, yesterday a group of students from Miller High School were here in the Assembly. Yesterday the Premier made a commitment, the Minister of Justice made a commitment, to meet with these students regarding a petition they have put together to address the concerns that everyone has regarding the Young Offenders Act.

Yesterday, Mr. Speaker, my colleagues and I had an opportunity to meet with the students, to look at their petition, and to sign it. However, Mr. Speaker, the Minister of Justice has yet to meet with that group of students.

Mr. Minister, I'm sure that your office staff have provided you

with a copy of the petition. Have you taken the time to read it and, Mr. Minister, do you support their petition?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Mr. Nilson: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's very clear that these students were overwhelmed yesterday by all the attention that they received. I immediately went out to ask them if they were available to meet, and they said, not today. I am going to meet with them, but yesterday they were very busy. And I understand that.

I think the important point to remember is that these young people have taken the initiative to become involved in some issues in Saskatchewan and in Canada, as particularly these are federal issues. And they have gone about setting out their ideas, their concerns, and entered into the public debate.

I think that's a very important thing for high school students, for all citizens of Saskatchewan to do, and I applaud them. I'm looking forward to meeting with them and discussing their issues. And when we have had a chance to discuss all of these things, then I think we will have a decision about whether we can support them or not.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Toth: — Mr. Speaker, I find it interesting that the minister is telling us that he met with them, when we were informed that they were waiting to meet and didn't have that opportunity.

Mr. Speaker, I asked the minister if he had read the petition, if he had even glanced at it to see what the students were bringing forward. And I would also like to ask the minister if he would give not just a firm commitment that he will meet, but if the minister has already given his staff the orders or asked them to contact the students and to plan a meeting next week at its latest possible time.

Can the minister give us a promise, not just a promise to meet, but a commitment to already set a date and a time and address this concern?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Mr. Nilson: — Mr. Speaker, I said before and I'll say it again, that my staff met with the teacher who was with them and the students and offered to meet with them yesterday afternoon. They were very clearly busy and taken up with all of their time with the media and with the members opposite. And they are going to meet with me at a time that's mutually convenient for all of us and we will fully discuss this. I have seen the petition. We have looked at it, and we are continuing to look at it.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Video Lottery Terminal Plebiscites

Mr. Osika: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. There is some degree of uncertainty as to who will respond to any of the questions from this side of the House today. However there is an issue

that is on the minds of people throughout this province, and it's an issue that should not just be looked at too lightly.

Mr. Speaker, media reports indicate that as many as 22 Alberta towns and villages may soon hold plebiscites to determine the future of VLTs in their communities. The people of Punnichy have expressed the same interest, and other Saskatchewan communities may very well follow suit.

Will the minister in charge of Liquor and Gaming tell this House how his government plans on addressing this issue?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Mr. Serby: — Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I want to first advise the member from Melville that I have indicated to hoteliers and to municipalities across the province that if in fact there is a petition that comes forward, that certainly I would be prepared to meet with any one of the communities that were to do that.

The member from Melville should remember here however, that this is a very, very delicate issue for communities to deal with. From the point of view that when this program was established in Saskatchewan, it was designed to protect hoteliers, to ensure that hoteliers in this province continued to have a livelihood.

We talk about jobs in small communities. We talk about a tax base in small communities that would be in some jeopardy. Hoteliers have been very clear that they want to ensure that VLTs remain in their community. And the member from Melville needs to ensure that that process stays in place.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Osika: — I thank the minister for his response, Mr. Speaker, but we have seen this government's tactic of pitting one group against another in several forms. To use two examples, we have seen community fighting community over health care funding. We are also seeing all levels of local government fighting each other because of this government's ill-prepared tax reassessment plans. Now this government appears prepared to spark a community versus community battle over VLTs.

Is the minister not concerned that individual plebiscites could set a precedent which leads to community fighting community over the issue; and would he not agree that a province-wide plebiscite on this issue of non-casino VLTs may be a better solution?

Hon. Mr. Serby: — Well, Mr. Speaker, I'm not sure on which side of the fence the member from Melville really sits, because the member from Melville understands that plebiscites are within the jurisdiction — or should understand — they're within the jurisdictions of the municipalities, and at the end of the day, they'll make those decisions as to whether or not they wish to hold one. The ultimate decision about whether or not there'll be a VLT program in Saskatchewan will rest of course with the government of the day.

But I hear the member from Melville criticizing the VLT

program this afternoon, Mr. Speaker. And I have a press release here . . . or an article that was in the paper, dated February 26, 1997, where the member from Melville says in its response to the Alberta Liberal issue, where the Liberals in Alberta were saying they don't support VLTs, the member from Melville says, that the "... election promise to phase out VLTs over three years is impractical, inequitable and possibly unconstitutional."

And the member goes on to say, Mr. Speaker, the member then goes on to say: "Let's allow (the) people to have the same choices (every) . . . other parts of (the province and) North America (have)." Let's leave VLTs in place. Where is the member from Melville sitting.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

911 Service Charges

Mr. Bjornerud: — Mr. Speaker, this week in this House the minister in charge of Municipal Government was questioned about a series of broken promises regarding VLT revenues which were to be earmarked to our cities, towns, and villages — a 911 service which was to be financed with those funds.

Mr. Speaker, the minister indicated a couple of days ago that it was premature to even talk about monthly 911 charges to municipalities, including those which already have 911 service. However, her officials are talking about new charges and fees to pay for the 911 service.

Will the minister be upfront with the people of Saskatchewan and explain why she and her department officials are sending mixed messages?

Hon. Mrs. Teichrob: — Mr. Speaker, thank you very much for that question. I think that the answer that I gave the other day, I was asked specifically whether a certain fee would be charged for users of 911. And what I said then — it's premature to talk about the amount because the planning is not yet finished.

In terms of the other, we spent \$2.4 million doing the mapping that's necessary for the 911 locator. We spent \$3 million on the radios for the RCMP (Royal Canadian Mounted Police), which is part of the response to the 911 call. Then SaskTel committed \$5.6 million to the capital for the infrastructure.

Now this is all capital and amounts to \$11 million, which was more than was in the municipal fund from the VLTs. It's \$1.5 million more than that line. So we kept our word. We put in more, and not took away.

Then there has to be, once the system is established, provision for operating it, and if there will be a fee and how much it will be, there's enabling legislation. But it will be incremental as the system grows to cover the whole province, and it will be at the discretion then of communities that are organizing their responses to the partnership.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Bjornerud: — Madam Minister, you've just admitted that

you had another broken promise, because not one dollar of that money found its way into municipal government coffers. Mr. Speaker, the minister indicated that the only reason the government did not hand over the 10 per cent VLT revenues to communities was because they could not come to a consensus on how to use the money.

Legislative rules do not permit me to state my honest feelings about this statement, but suffice it to say our communities do not share this version of events. Mr. Speaker, the minister also stated that this 10 per cent VLT revenue, some \$10 million annually, is being returned to our communities, as she's tried to let on.

Will the minister explain in specific terms and in a better way than you have tried to do, Madam Minister, and specifically to the municipalities that are listening today, how you are returning these dollars? And I say you are not returning these dollars.

Hon. Mrs. Teichrob: — Mr. Speaker, maybe the rules of the House don't allow me to express my views frankly either, in this particular instance. However, let me say that this was . . . Read the press release. Go back and read the press release from 1995. It never once said that one dime was going to municipal governments. It said, it's going to be returned to communities for the benefit of the people of the province.

And it is being returned. It is being returned in spades — in education, in health care, in highways, in municipal grants. All across the piece, it's being spent for the betterment of the quality of life in Saskatchewan, including the development of the 911.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

ORDERS OF THE DAY

WRITTEN QUESTIONS

Mr. Kowalsky: — Mr. Speaker, I respectfully request that the question no. 20 be converted to notice of motion for return (debatable).

The Speaker: — Item no. 1 is converted to motions for return (debatable).

Mr. Kowalsky: — Mr. Speaker, in the spirit of open, accountable, and responsible government, I hereby table the answer to question 21.

The Speaker: — The answer to item no. 2 is tabled.

GOVERNMENT ORDERS

COMMITTEE OF FINANCE

TABLING OF ESTIMATES AND SUPPLEMENTARY ESTIMATES

Hon. Ms. MacKinnon: — Mr. Speaker, I have a message from His Honour the Lieutenant Governor.

The Speaker: — I'll ask all hon. members to rise for the reading of the message from His Honour.

The message is as follows; from the office of the Lieutenant Governor:

The Lieutenant Governor transmits estimates of certain sums required for the service of the province for the 12 months ending March 31, 1998, and supplementary estimates of certain sums required for the service of the province for the 12 months ending March 31, 1997, and recommends the same to the Legislative Assembly. (Signed) The Honourable John E.N. Wiebe, Lieutenant Governor, province of Saskatchewan.

Members may be seated.

Hon. Ms. MacKinnon: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I move, seconded by the Premier:

That His Honour's message, the estimates, and supplementary estimates be referred to the Committee of Finance.

Motion agreed to.

MOTION FOR COMMITTEE OF FINANCE (BUDGET DEBATE)

Hon. Ms. MacKinnon: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, there are many special guests who have joined us today and I welcome them all. There are five very special people in my life here today that I would like to personally acknowledge, and I would ask each of them to stand.

First is my husband, Peter MacKinnon, who is acting vice-president, academic, at the University of Saskatchewan. Beside him is my son Alan MacKinnon and his friend, Tricia Mutlow, who are students at Walter Murray Collegiate. Next to them is my son William MacKinnon, who is enrolled at Aden Bowman. And next to him is a long-time family friend, Bill Kinloch. I'd like to thank each of you for your ongoing trust and support.

I'd also like to thank the government caucus for its tremendous support and counsel as we developed this budget. During this budget, they were asked to maintain confidentiality for more than six weeks. They said it couldn't be done; I said, nobody else could do it. Mr. Speaker, this is the finest caucus in all of Canada.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Ms. MacKinnon: — Mr. Speaker, I'm very pleased today to present a budget that invests in people, a budget about creating more growth and jobs, a budget about reaping the benefits of sacrifices past.

Mr. Speaker, Saskatchewan people have come a long way together. Five short years ago, we confronted a financial crisis, a large deficit, a growing debt, rising interest payments gobbling up dollars that could've been invested in people.

To overcome this crisis, Saskatchewan people turned to their traditions — traditions of cooperation, compassion, and community. Everyone pulled together to restore the province's finances. Together we started paying down the mortgage on our children's future. Today we will plainly see the benefits of our work together. Today I am presenting another balanced budget.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Ms. MacKinnon: — Our fourth balanced budget in a row, and three more to come — right into the next century. No other province will surpass that record.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Ms. MacKinnon: — Today our debt is falling and we are spending less on interest payments. This frees up money to invest in people.

Mr. Speaker, balanced budgets, fiscal stability, declining debt — these are the foundations of a strong economy and a healthy society.

Fiscal stability and predictability attract new investment, growth, and jobs. In 1996 investors and business people were active in every sector and corner of the province. Resource exploration set a new high. Business investment was up 18 per cent. Manufacturing shipments up 10 per cent — the highest increase in all of Canada.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Ms. MacKinnon: — Retail sales up 8 per cent — triple the Canadian average. Housing starts up more than 40 per cent. Our population is growing again, rising to the highest level in eight years. Best of all, Saskatchewan families are showing renewed confidence, hope, and optimism. Now is the time to invest in people, to build an even better future.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Ms. MacKinnon: — As we build that future, let us remember the lessons of the past. The 1980s taught us spending today and paying tomorrow is wrong. It shackles our children with debt they do not deserve. This government remains committed to living within our means, to spending responsibly, to the discipline of paying our bills, not leaving them to burden our children. That is how we earned our financial freedom. That is how we will keep it.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Ms. MacKinnon: — Mr. Speaker, while we have to remember the lessons of the past, we cannot return to it. Governments can no longer be all things to all people. Today people want governments to focus on their priorities, to reflect their values. They want more than short-term, short-sighted, quick-fix schemes. They want governments to make sound, long-term investments.

But most important, people want governments to do all they can to live up to their commitments. Broken promises mean broken

dreams and the loss of trust and faith.

Five years ago, we made a commitment to restore the province's finances and we promised to do it with fairness and balance, reducing the debt, strengthening our social programs, cutting taxes — all three together, in balance, with fairness. That's what this budget is all about.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Ms. MacKinnon: — Keeping our promises, Mr. Speaker — that's what this government is all about.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Ms. MacKinnon: — Mr. Speaker, now is the time to build on our strong fiscal and economic foundations. Now is the time to spur our economy to greater success, to greater heights.

Mr. Speaker, the spirit of cooperation has long been a defining feature of a strong and growing Saskatchewan. To build on that heritage, I'm pleased to announce increased funding for our new, refocused department of economic and cooperative development.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Ms. MacKinnon: — Through our expanded cooperatives directorate within the department, we will promote growth and jobs today and into the future. We are building on our strengths, working with Saskatchewan people to create jobs right in their own communities.

We will keep working with our regional economic development authorities to promote growth and jobs locally. We will keep working with industry to build on our record as an exporting province, where one in three jobs is export related.

We will keep working with farm groups to strengthen and expand agriculture, the foundation of our economy.

Mr. Speaker, stability and predictability are just as important to a farmer near Unity as to a shopkeeper in Moose Jaw. We all know the risks of farming — too much or too little rain; an early frost. These can push a farm family to the brink financially. That's why we worked with our partners in agriculture to ensure income stability and security for farm families. Last year we paid down \$150 million in crop insurance debt.

(1430)

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Ms. MacKinnon: — Today we have a new, sustainable crop insurance program with lower premiums and better protection for farmers.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Ms. MacKinnon: — Mr. Speaker, new products and

better crops give farm families more options. That's why we're working with farmers to develop the products of the future, everything from specialized crops and health food supplements to animal vaccines.

Saskatchewan farmers are also leading the way in expanding and diversifying to capture new market opportunities. Canada's western provinces are emerging as major suppliers to the growing world market for pork. Mr. Speaker, we're teaming up with Saskatchewan farmers to pull ahead of the competition. I am pleased to announce a new initiative to promote our hog industry and other livestock operations. Effective midnight tonight, a new education and health tax rebate will be introduced to encourage investment in livestock production.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Ms. MacKinnon: — With this tax incentive and our comprehensive hog strategy, we expect Saskatchewan's hog production to triple by 2005. This means hundreds of new jobs and opportunities in rural Saskatchewan.

We've been using targeted tax incentives since 1992 to create growth and jobs. We strengthened our small businesses by reducing their income taxes by 20 per cent. We attracted new call centres by removing the sales tax on 1-800 numbers. We improved the tax treatment for Saskatchewan-based truckers.

We also introduced a number of tax incentives for manufacturing and processing. This growing sector continues to create thousands of new jobs. This budget builds on our momentum, with one more reason for manufacturers and processors to expand, one more reason for them to create jobs today and even more jobs tomorrow. Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to announce the manufacturing and processing investment tax credit will be extended to include used equipment.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Ms. MacKinnon: — Our manufacturers and processors can now receive a tax credit on new equipment and used equipment they bring into the province to expand their operations.

Mr. Speaker, manufacturers and processors, farmers, miners, and loggers, all rely on our roads to get resources and products to the world market. Our roads are also the vital link between our communities, farms, schools, hospitals, and businesses. Our roads bring thousands of tourists to every corner of Saskatchewan, bringing jobs and opportunities for our youth, students, and business people. But our roads and highways are under heavy pressure. Federal deregulation of railways, rail line abandonments, the loss of the Crow benefit — all this is taking its toll.

Mr. Speaker, we have to act and we have to act now. That's why I am announcing today the first phase of our long-term plan to work with communities on a modern transportation network. I'm pleased to announce that over the next 10 years we will invest \$2.5 billion in Saskatchewan's roads and highways.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Ms. MacKinnon: — This investment starts with \$200 million in 1997-98. That's an 18 per cent increase over last year's budget.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Ms. MacKinnon: — Increased funding, a strategic plan for tomorrow — that's a solid, long-term commitment to our essential roads and highways.

We're also joining the one-year extension of the federal-provincial infrastructure program, and we're directing the entire federal and provincial share to municipal projects. With the municipal share, that's \$35 million this year to build stronger communities and create jobs. Much of this funding will be directed to roads.

Mr. Speaker, these short-term, one-time federal commitments are welcome, but what we really need are long-term permanent programs, especially for roads. Sadly we're the only country in the western world without a national transportation program.

We're ready to work with the federal government and the other provinces to build a modern, comprehensive, national transportation system for the 21st century. Today Saskatchewan has put its investment for roads and highways on the table; now we're calling on the federal government to match our contribution.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Ms. MacKinnon: — Mr. Speaker, infrastructure means more than just roads and highways. This year government departments and Crown corporations will invest \$640 million to build and upgrade our state of the art telecommunication system, our power and energy grid, our hospitals, health centres, and schools.

Provincial parks are also an important part of our heritage and quality of life. This budget further invests in Saskatchewan people and tourism by improving camping and recreational facilities in parks right across the province.

Roads, parks, thriving modern communities — Mr. Speaker, we're putting a new face on Saskatchewan, on our way to the new century.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Ms. MacKinnon: — That's how you build for the future. That's how you invest in people for prosperity and jobs.

Mr. Speaker, ask Saskatchewan people what they cherish about our province and they will tell you: fresh, clean air; wide open spaces; friendly and helpful people; a great place to raise children; a place we're proud to call home.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Ms. MacKinnon: — Our social programs are at the heart

of our quality of life. They're the envy of the world. Saskatchewan has a long and proud tradition of compassion and social innovation. These traditions served us well in the past and they put us in the vanguard of the future.

But society is only as strong as its weakest link. Our world continues to face a real and looming problem — the widening gap between rich and poor nations and between rich and poor people. In this environment, more and more people feel no hope, no chance, and nothing left to lose. This sets the stage for crime and social unrest. That's why we must work continually to ensure that every person, rich or poor, has access to health care; that every child, rich or poor, can get a quality education; and that a social safety net is in place to catch those who have fallen on hard times and need help getting back on their feet. That is why this budget secures our universal health care, strengthens our world-class education system, and broadens our social safety net.

Mr. Speaker, building for tomorrow means investing in our children. We all want our children to enjoy healthy and happy lives. Canada is a wealthy nation. No parent should have to worry that their children want for food, warm clothing, or a safe home. That's what makes child poverty a sad and unnecessary blight on our country. We must change this. That is why our province is leading the fight against child poverty.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Ms. MacKinnon: — Mr. Speaker, a good job is still the best way to lift families out of poverty and off social assistance. Jobs will always be our top priority. But today the Canadian system hurts working-poor parents. It claws back the modest benefits they need to care properly for their children. That's why we championed a national plan to help parents better provide for their children, and keep working.

We promoted the concept of a national child benefit at federal-provincial meetings right across this country. Such a plan would be the first new national social program in 30 years. Last month the federal government announced its intentions for a national child benefit program, and that's a promising start. But the plan won't begin until July 1998, and there is no national commitment to adequate long-term funding.

Needy children deserve help today. And for our part, this budget backs words with action.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Ms. MacKinnon: — Our internationally acclaimed action plan for children is already blazing the trail to a better future for thousands of Saskatchewan young people. Thanks to this plan, more school children enjoy hot meals, more teen parents stay in school, and more recreational programs keep children off the street.

Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to announce that our action plan for children will provide \$13 million more in benefits and services for Saskatchewan children this year.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Ms. MacKinnon: — Now thousands more children and families will see a real improvement in their day-to-day lives. More children will receive the textbooks, notebooks, erasers, and pencils they need for school without cutting into the family budget for food and housing. More children will begin their day with nutritious meals. And when their parents go to work, more children will be cared for. We'll build new and improved child care centres in our inner cities, in our rural areas, and in the North.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Ms. MacKinnon: — These measures give us the strong bridge we need until the long-term national plan is in place. And we will never let up until that plan is firmly established, a plan that can improve the future of children and families from coast to coast.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

(1445)

Hon. Ms. MacKinnon: — Mr. Speaker, thousands of Saskatchewan people have made helping others their way of life. They work in women's shelters, homes for the disabled, and child care centres. For too long, they've laboured for low wages. After a lifetime of work, many don't even have the dignity of a small pension. These people have invested their lives in helping others. This budget invests in them.

Today I am pleased to announce \$10 million over three years for these front line care workers. That's to give them better wages and pensions.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Ms. MacKinnon: — This investment includes \$500,000 this year to improve the wages of our child care workers.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Ms. MacKinnon: — Step by step, we're making lives better and making our communities safer.

We're also working with others to build a province-wide 911 system to bring emergency services right to the doorstep of every Saskatchewan family. We're increasing funding for more RCMP officers in rural Saskatchewan.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Ms. MacKinnon: — But our plan is not only to respond to crime. This budget advances innovative options to reduce crime. Restorative justice, community service, sentencing circles — these forward-looking initiatives bring our communities and our cultures together to build a safer and better Saskatchewan.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Ms. MacKinnon: — Mr. Speaker, the mark of a great society is how well it treats its most vulnerable citizens. Our

social safety net must always be there to protect people, but it should never become a trap. Real pride and hope come with self-respect and self-sufficiency. This budget takes significant steps to improve the lives of needy children, youth, and families. But most important, Mr. Speaker, it gives them real hope for the future.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Ms. MacKinnon: — This budget also prepares our children to live and work in the new knowledge-based economy. New technologies and globalization are changing our world, creating thousands of exciting challenges and opportunities.

Our schools must give our children a head start. Good teachers and a strong curriculum will always be essential, but the tools of the future, like access to the Internet, are becoming increasingly important. Our school boards and schools lead the way in using these new technologies. Programs like distance education bring students high quality instruction no matter where they live.

We can build on this strong foundation by investing in our children. Therefore I am pleased to announce that operating grants for schools will increase to \$363 million in 1997-98 and to \$369 million in 1998-99. That's a \$22 million increase over last year.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Ms. MacKinnon: — Our children also need a learning environment that is safe and healthy. Therefore I am pleased to announce that this budget provides \$17 million to build and renovate Saskatchewan schools. That's a 40 per cent increase over last year.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Ms. MacKinnon: — Mr. Speaker, we're investing in Saskatchewan students to keep them at the head of the class. Active learning minds must never be blocked by the lack of money or privilege.

In Canada the doors to a higher education have always been open, but federal cuts to post-secondary operating funding are undermining this system.

Mr. Speaker, we in Saskatchewan are living up to our responsibilities. Our two universities are working hard to cut administration and duplication so that every available dollar can be spent in classrooms improving our students' education. They are now putting in place ideas from the MacKay report. Already they've planned a new fibre optic link between campuses to share lecture and research information.

Mr. Speaker, they're doing their part, and we will do ours. I'm pleased to announce \$3 million in special funding this year. This funding will support their initiatives to share resources and will bring new technology like multimedia into their classrooms and libraries.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Ms. MacKinnon: — In addition, we are more than doubling our ongoing capital grants this year.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Ms. MacKinnon: — In total, we're providing \$14 million to help our universities upgrade scientific and research equipment, to modernize labs and classrooms, to equip our students to excel in the new high-tech economy.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Ms. MacKinnon: — Thousands of students today are frustrated by the federal cuts which they know are driving up tuitions. We share their frustration, and we're doing something about it. This budget replaces, dollar for dollar, federal cuts to our universities.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Ms. MacKinnon: — Mr. Speaker, I'm pleased to announce operating funding for our universities will be \$163 million in both 1997-98 and 1998-99.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Ms. MacKinnon: — This funding will allow our universities to reconsider their recent tuition announcements.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Ms. MacKinnon: — This is a substantial investment to help keep the doors of higher education open to Saskatchewan people.

Mr. Speaker, learning today is a lifelong experience. An explosion in information and technology is creating exciting new jobs and opportunities. Our young people will need to be trained and retrained throughout their careers to get and keep these jobs.

Just when we need to do more, the federal government is shutting down thousands of training spaces at SIAST (Saskatchewan Institute of Applied Science and Technology) and our regional colleges. More than one in four training opportunities will be lost as a result of these federal cuts. Apprenticeship programs alone will lose 70 per cent of their funding.

That's why we're building our own made-in-Saskatchewan training system.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Ms. MacKinnon: — Mr. Speaker, our young people are eager and ambitious. We must give them the training and skills they need to get ahead. Over the next three years, we will deliver more training to more young people for more jobs than ever in the history of this province. We're completely restoring

funding for apprenticeship and adult basic education.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Ms. MacKinnon: — We're building on the strengths of SIAST and our regional colleges. We're expanding our successful JobStart and Future Skills programs. In total, this budget provides \$117 million this year to prepare Saskatchewan men and women for jobs today and tomorrow.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Ms. MacKinnon: — That's investing in people.

Mr. Speaker, this year Saskatchewan commemorates one of its finest achievements. Thirty-five years ago this province gave Canada medicare so that everyone, rich or poor, rural or urban, young or old, would receive the best health care available regardless of the size of his or her bank account.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Ms. MacKinnon: — Today universal health care is under attack. The federal government says it supports the basic principles of public health care, yet it cuts billions of dollars from Canada's social programs. These cuts threaten to push our great country into a two-tiered health system.

Mr. Speaker, what a sad and backward step. Saskatchewan people know the danger of a two-tiered system. Many remember when families had to choose between medical help and food or clothing, when hospital and medical costs could mean financial ruin. Mr. Speaker, as long as we are here, we promise those days will never come back.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Ms. MacKinnon: — Saskatchewan people want one strong, publicly funded system available to all. That's why we are replacing every single federal dollar cut from health. On top of that, this budget makes a further major investment in health care. I am pleased to announce that we are providing health districts with an additional \$51 million this year.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Ms. MacKinnon: — This funding will bring advanced technology and better services to Saskatchewan people. More seniors will now enjoy the independence of living in their own homes. That's because round-the-clock home care will be just a call away. More people will have easier access to an MRI (magnetic resonance imaging) unit with one in Saskatoon and one in Regina.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Ms. MacKinnon: — More people will receive faster, better emergency services, especially in rural Saskatchewan. Mr. Speaker, one out of every \$3 this government spends will be invested in health. This investment builds a stable and secure health system for today and develops the new services families will need for tomorrow.

Imagine the day when the parent of a sick child can receive the immediate advice of a specialist in Saskatoon or Regina, or even Toronto, regardless of where they live in Saskatchewan. That's the vision behind Telemedicine — an exciting new project to establish video links between health professionals and patients.

Imagine the day when medical care can be provided closer to home for families right across Saskatchewan. That's the vision behind our plan to include advanced clinical nurses in our new health teams.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Ms. MacKinnon: — These are just two examples of how we will be building our modern universal health system for today and tomorrow — a caring, compassionate, stable, and secure health system; a health system that will always be there when people need it. That's what the men and women of this province who pioneered medicare would have expected. That's what Saskatchewan people and families deserve.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Ms. MacKinnon: — Mr. Speaker, a healthy society, a growing economy, sound finances — these are Saskatchewan's ingredients for success now and into the new century.

We promised a balanced approach. We promised a balance between debt reduction, enhanced social programs, and tax cuts. We're keeping our promise to reduce the provincial debt.

In 1993, Saskatchewan's debt was equal to more than 70 per cent of all the goods and services produced in the province. Today it has been reduced to 49 per cent. By the year 2001, the total debt load will be cut to 36 per cent.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Ms. MacKinnon: — Our annual interest bill will be \$200 million less than in 1995.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Ms. MacKinnon: — That's money we can put to work to strengthen social programs or reduce taxes.

We're also keeping our promise to protect the cornerstones of our quality of life — health, social services, education. We're replacing 100 per cent of the federal cuts to these vital, social programs.

But we're not stopping there. We set out a plan to preserve and enhance our quality of life right into the next century.

We're also keeping our promise to lower taxes. In 1995, we reduced personal income taxes and we did it with fairness. We made sure that every single Saskatchewan taxpayer benefited from this tax cut.

But there was compassion as well as fairness. More than 6,000 lower income earners no longer pay income tax because of this

measure.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Ms. MacKinnon: — The way we apply the education and health tax is further confirmation of the fairness of our tax system. We do not apply the sales tax to family essentials — items like children's clothing, electricity, and home heating fuel. Other provinces tax these items.

And Mr. Speaker, I'd like to remind everyone that under the federal government's harmonized tax scheme, these family essentials would be taxed. We do not tax them because we believe they are a necessary part of the family budget.

We also believe that other family expenses such as certain medical devices should not be taxed — items like glucose monitors, cholesterol testers, medical supports, and braces. Therefore, I'm pleased to announce an extension of the sales tax exemption for medical equipment. Effective midnight tonight these and similar medical devices will no longer be taxed.

(1500)

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Ms. MacKinnon: — But we promised to do even more when we could afford to. We believe that when a tax cut is given, it has to be sustainable through the future.

Mr. Speaker, the province's finances are sound. Our economy is strong and growing. Today we can introduce a further responsible, sustainable tax cut — a tax cut that will benefit families right across the province; a tax cut that puts \$180 million back into Saskatchewan pocketbooks and cash registers each and every year; a tax cut that business people told us would do more than any other single measure to create jobs.

Mr. Speaker, I'm very pleased today to announce a reduction in Saskatchewan's sales tax. Effective midnight tonight, the education and health tax will be reduced from 9 per cent to 7 per cent.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Ms. MacKinnon: — This is the tax cut Saskatchewan people have worked so hard for. As of midnight tonight, the people of Saskatchewan will pay less in sales tax than any other province with such a tax.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Ms. MacKinnon: — Mr. Speaker, this tax cut proves that discipline and sound financial management pays off, but today's budget shows something more. It shows this government's determination to keep our commitments and to take a balanced approach. It shows we can pay down debt, we can create prosperity and jobs, we can cut taxes. We can do all of these things and still enhance and strengthen the social programs that make Saskatchewan the best place in the whole world in which to live.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Ms. MacKinnon: — Mr. Speaker, all the strategic investments and benefits I've announced today were made possible by Saskatchewan people — by their determination, their hard work, their sacrifice and discipline.

Today's benefits are the rewards of sound, careful management of the public purse. And today we are renewing our commitment to the people of Saskatchewan — our promise to invest wisely and to safeguard our ability to choose our own future.

William Jennings Bryan once wrote:

Destiny is a matter of choice; it is not a thing to be waited for, it is a thing to be achieved.

Today we stand on the threshold of a new century filled with confidence and optimism. We've made our choices — growth and jobs, roads and infrastructure, social programs, lower taxes. We are achieving our destiny with balance, fairness, and responsible financial management.

That's how to invest in people. That's how to build a modern, prosperous, and cooperative society. That's how to work together to build a better today and an even better tomorrow on our way to the 21st century.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Ms. MacKinnon: — Mr. Speaker, I move, seconded by the Premier:

That this Assembly do now resolve itself into the Committee of Finance.

Mr. Gantefer: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my honour to respond to the Minister of Finance's budget address on behalf of the official opposition. While I'll save the bulk of my comments for tomorrow, there are a few brief points that I wish to make today before adjourning debate.

Mr. Speaker, for over five years now, the people of Saskatchewan have been on the receiving end of some very harsh medicine administered by this government, and this Minister of Finance in particular. And yes, Mr. Speaker, some serious measures have been needed after the financial disaster left over by the Conservatives under Grant Devine. However, the type and extent of that medicine is where the government opposite has gotten off track.

And while some of the announcements in today's budget may take a small portion of the sting out of the last five years, we have a long way to go before we heal the destructiveness this government has created on people's lives.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Gantefer: — Mr. Speaker, obviously a very significant portion of the budget we have just heard concerns the provincial sales tax. The official opposition welcomes the news

that the Minister of Finance has finally seen fit to listen to what so many have been saying for so long.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Gantefer: — I think we can all remember that when the Liberal Party campaigned on reducing the sales tax in 1995, the members opposite ridiculed us and said it would do nothing to promote economic development in Saskatchewan. It's heartening to see they've finally agreed with us, late though it is.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Gantefer: — Obviously we welcome this reduction. And at the same time, we offer our congratulations to business people, to business organizations, and Saskatchewan residents in general who have finally forced this government to listen for a change.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Gantefer: — At the same time though, I believe a little perspective is needed on this issue. Rather than calling this full-scale tax relief, as the government members no doubt will, I see it as a slight reprieve from the opposition . . . members opposite have taken so far out of people. Their approach has been to tax the life out of Saskatchewan businesses and people since 1991 and squeeze the economic life out of them.

And the result of this can be seen in this government's job creation numbers, Mr. Speaker. Last year in this province, a paltry 1,000 new jobs were created and many of them were part time or low paying. That's certainly not a record for this government to be very proud of, especially when you consider during the very same period 30,000 jobs were created in Alberta, and even more startling, 24,000 jobs created in Manitoba last year.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Gantefer: — It's mind-boggling that Manitoba which is so similar to Saskatchewan in so many ways created 24 times more jobs than we see here. And it appears that the story will be similar this year. In the first two months of 1997, 7,000 new jobs were created here. And, Mr. Speaker, I would submit that those 7,000 jobs that were created here were created in spite of this government, not because of it.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Gantefer: — And again, let's look by contrast to Manitoba. During this same period 20,000 people found employment in Manitoba. Totalled up, during the last 14 months our sister prairie provinces have created 54,000 new jobs to this government's 8,000. It's a shameful record, Mr. Speaker, and it's a record that continues to chase our best and brightest out of the province.

This government constantly brags about the low unemployment rate in Saskatchewan. Of course our unemployment rate is low. Anyone who is unfortunate enough to be looking for work in

Saskatchewan soon learns that it's a futile search and is headed off to other provinces.

Between 1992 and 1995, 13,464 more people left Saskatchewan than came here. Many of these are our kids who have had to abandon their home province in search of opportunities elsewhere. We raise them here, we educate them here, and then we send them away. This isn't what I'd call an investment in our people, Mr. Speaker.

And let's look at the reduction in the PST. What this government has done today is reduce the PST back to the point where it was when they came to power. Yes, we're now at exactly the same point we were five years ago. Only in Saskatchewan would they call that progress.

And let's take a look at the tax take by this government in general. Even after forgoing the \$180 million with this reduction in the PST, this government is taking in nearly \$800 million more today than it did in 1992 — 800 million, Mr. Speaker. Clearly this is not a government that gives up its tax dollars easily. And what they are giving back to the people of the province is but a fraction of what they've been gouging over the last five years.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Gantefer: — And the effects have been devastating. Between 1992 and 1995 the rate of personal savings in Saskatchewan fell 39 per cent. The people of Saskatchewan have been forced to mortgage their future to pay the bills of today.

This is the true legacy of the members opposite, Mr. Speaker. The government is better off, but the people certainly are not. And today's announcement of a reduction in the PST, while certainly welcome, doesn't even come close to bringing our citizens back to the same point they were only a few years ago.

I find it even more interesting that these same members who only months ago said tax cuts would do nothing to spur our economy, now see this reduction in the PST as the key that'll make our economy boom.

It won't do that, Mr. Speaker, because it's only one small piece of the puzzle when it comes to creating a good climate for small business. While the reduction is good news for small business, the main engine of economic development in Saskatchewan, more has to be done.

Saskatchewan's onerous labour policies remain impediments to small businesses. Labour standards, The Trade Union Act, the Crown Construction Tendering Agreement, these are only but a few of the hurdles this government has thrown in the way of small business. And if we are to continue to build a strong economy and promote economic development, we must find a friendlier climate for small business. These things have been pushing us in the opposite direction.

Mr. Speaker, I find the title of the budget, *Investing in People*, particularly interesting when I look at the government's so-called commitment to the key areas I mentioned earlier —

health care, education, and social services. And of course, Mr. Speaker, we can't forget highways. I, along with my colleagues, will tackle these issues in more detail as the budget debate progresses in the days ahead, but I do want to say a few preliminary words about them today.

Let's start with highways. I know many of the guests who have travelled long distances to be with us today probably drove over some pretty bumpy roads to get to Regina. These are roads that have been neglected for almost two successive administrations. The Conservatives began the ball rolling on the deterioration of our provincial highway system and the NDP followed suit, step for step, when they came to power in 1991.

Everyone knows it's a lot easier to repair an existing highway than to start from scratch, but many of our roads have crumbled to the point where that's exactly what we'll have to do — start from scratch. So let's take a look at this government's new-found commitment to highways in our province — a province that depends more on passable, safe roads than probably anywhere in Canada.

Taking a look at the press release put out under the Minister of Highways' name, the figures may look impressive — 2.5 billion over 10 years. Yes, to the average person out there in our province making a living, this is a lot of money. At first glance it may appear that there's a new-found commitment to our highway system — at first glance. But at second glance, the real story of this government's true commitment to safe highways and roads becomes obvious.

(1515)

Take a second look, Mr. Speaker. Take a look at what this government is actually committing itself to. Not much, by my estimation. Very little of this is new spending. There's very little investment here. The province increased commitment to highways amounts to about \$15 million this year, once you account for the federal government's share.

But that's only a drop in the bucket when one considers the shameful and dangerous conditions our roads are in. In fact this extra money doesn't even bring the department's budget back to the level it was when the NDP government came to power. An addition to the '97-98 Highways budget of \$200 million, only represents 40 per cent of what this government takes in from the gas tax and vehicles registration fees. Quite a commitment — 40 per cent.

Mr. Speaker, in many municipalities around Saskatchewan the grid road and country road system has been just devastated by this government's lack of commitment. Part of the problem has been the overall drubbing local governments have taken at the hands of the Minister of Finance.

This minister always takes the first opportunity to point fingers and yell and protest when she loses a sliver of her revenue through federal transfer reductions, thinks nothing of hitting municipal governments with cuts year after year after year after year, Mr. Speaker. And these are cuts that are quickly passed along to local taxpayers. Again, the provincial government may be better off through these measures. The people definitely are

not.

This year, rural revenue-sharing grants will be cut by another \$12 million while urban grants will drop another \$17 million. All added up, this amounts to another 30 per cent cut to local governments. Just compare this to the so-called devastating cut-backs this government has received from Ottawa. Despite this government's constant criticism of the federal government for transfer reductions, this year those cuts amount to just \$59 million or 1.16 per cent of provincial spending. Compare this to what the province has done to the municipalities and it puts everything into perspective, Mr. Speaker.

What's more, nearly every dollar of the transfer cut-back is made up in the form of savings this province is beginning to realize because of the sound fiscal policies of the federal government and interest rate reduction.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Gantefer: — Because of its sound financial planning and its intelligent, realistic policies, interest rates are the lowest they've been in decades. This has saved the province \$30 million this year alone in interest payments. However, we don't expect any credit from the members opposite, even if it's a reality.

Let's move on to health care, staggering under this government's policies. For the past five years, the health care system has been starved and the effects have been frightening, Mr. Speaker. We've lost acute care in much of rural Saskatchewan. Hospitals have been replaced with health centres which provide limited services. People are saying, it's just not good enough.

And what do we see from this government? We see an increase in funding that barely covers the rate of inflation for the past year. And if you look at the funding levels over the past five years, you'll see the budget has not even kept pace with inflation. And that doesn't take into consideration the failing system that this government has put in place — the dollars that are there that are making it to where they're most needed. The members opposite have done nothing to address this.

The system is rotten, Mr. Speaker, and this pitiful increase in funding isn't going to do anything to cure that rot. And the fact remains, districts throughout the province will again face sizeable deficits and this budget does nothing to address this.

And while the destruction of the health care system is harming our sick and our elderly, our children face increasing challenges as well, as an investment in education. Again, this government is using every trick in the book to make it look as if education is getting a boost. But in reality, Mr. Speaker, the increase in funding covers only the cost this government imposed on school boards for an increase in teachers' wages — an increase negotiated by the government but paid for by the school boards.

In reality then, there's no increased spending for students for our future. Schools will continue to close and our kids will continue to suffer. This government is simply playing a cynical shell game. We fully expect another wage increase for teachers

this year and there's nothing here to cover that cost to school boards.

Again, Mr. Speaker, it doesn't look like much of an investment for the people of Saskatchewan.

For the universities, the government has cancelled previously announced cuts. In other words, Mr. Speaker, they're now back-filling themselves. Again this is welcome news, but it's not what I'd call an investment in people.

Mr. Speaker, we've seen a shocking lack of commitment to our agricultural community — the heart and soul of this province. While they point to the end of the Crow rate by the federal government as a major hit to our farmers, again that is short-sighted. We should look at the end of the Crow rate as an opportunity, Mr. Speaker — an opportunity to keep our products here and build a value added industry.

But let's look at their commitment, Mr. Speaker. This budget forecasts a \$40 million cut. That's a direct result in the farm income stabilization program, which was reduced 55 million itself. The government's reduction in those programs warrants very close monitoring, and it's of a major concern.

Of course, we've seen a major lack of commitment in agriculture in the past. Anyone who remembers the action taken with GRIP (gross revenue insurance program) knows that farmers are not a major concern to this government.

Mr. Speaker, this government seems to be putting its stock into building a hog industry in Saskatchewan, and we support this fully, as we support the sales tax rebate for building materials and equipment needed for this industry. We believe this rebate should have been expanded to the construction equipment and machinery industry so we could be more competitive with other provinces and have the tools to rebuild our highways.

Mr. Speaker, when you're talking about investing in people, you can't forget the most downtrodden. Mr. Speaker, this budget cuts the Social Services budget at a time when poverty levels are at their worst. We do, however, applaud the fact this government is redesigning the social assistance programs. The member from Humboldt will have much more to say on this in the days to come.

Mr. Speaker, in the end this budget will not do what the government says it'll do. Yes, there are good things in it, but they are far too little and far too late. It's more of the same. Yes, some of the hard edges of past budgets have been shaved off and there are parts of the budget we fully support.

Overall, this government continues to be out of touch. And until they get a real dose of reality on that side of the House, our province will fail to move forward.

And so, Mr. Speaker, I'll have much more to say tomorrow on this budget. For now I move to adjourn debate.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Debate adjourned.

Resumption of Budget Debate

Hon. Ms. MacKinnon: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I move, seconded by the Premier:

That debate on the motion that this Assembly do now resolve itself into the Committee of Finance be resumed on Friday, March 21, 1997.

Motion agreed to.

The Assembly adjourned at 3:24 p.m.

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