

SPECIAL ORDER
ADJOURNED DEBATES
ADDRESS IN REPLY

The Assembly resumed the adjourned debate on the address in reply which was moved by Ms. Jones, seconded by Mr. McCall, and the proposed amendment moved by Mr. Hermanson.

Mr. Wall: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Before we recessed for a bit of a break, I was talking about the perspective that Swift Current people are looking at this Throne Speech on the issues of taxes and the economy. I was pointing out that people in Swift Current have made the link long ago between the two, that if we can achieve the lowest possible tax rate in various areas, we're going to be better able to compete for more taxpayers and thereby providing the resources that we need to fund the things that have become so important to us here in Saskatchewan.

And, Mr. Speaker, I was talking about the fact that many accountants in my home town have lamented the fact that they have to counsel their clients, when they're considering selling out of an existing business, either to retire or maybe to invest it in another business, that they counsel them to get a Medicine Hat address first, to move to Alberta first because of the punitive nature of our taxes. Mr. Speaker, the accountants said they don't want to advise their clients that. They want to give them good reason to stay here in the province, but the tax structure under this regime, Mr. Speaker, is not that good reason. It's not good enough for them to be able to advise their clients to stay.

And you know, sometimes it isn't just the business people and the job creators . . . although we need every one that we can who are making a decision to vote with their feet.

Right now, as we speak, Mr. Speaker, my cousins are planning to relocate to Medicine Hat from Swift Current. They will take their young family — two small children and a husband and wife — to Medicine Hat. And in that case they actually have a job currently in Swift Current at a local business. The job that my cousin-in-law is moving to in fact doesn't afford him more pay. It's a more interesting job that he's interested in, but it's about the same pay. But when you net it all out, when you take a look at the energy costs in Medicine Hat and the property taxes and the income taxes, it was easy for him to make the decision — too easy, Mr. Speaker, for him to make that decision. We have to do everything that we can to make that decision almost impossible for families in Swift Current and families in other Saskatchewan communities to make, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, as we look at this Throne Speech, don't get me wrong. People in Swift Current understand that we cannot beat Alberta at the tax game. They simply have had too long of a head start, about a 50-year head start on keeping their taxes low while still providing services to their citizens. But we have to try to pick our spots where we can win, Mr. Speaker, where we can beat Alberta and where we can compete against other jurisdictions like Manitoba. And sometimes it doesn't cost a lot

of money. Sometimes it doesn't take too much of a tax cut to achieve that, and some businesses who wish to stay here but are faced with difficult decisions aren't even looking for a tax cut at all.

Some of them, and we met one earlier today, is simply looking for a road, a highway, Mr. Speaker. The manufacturer that was here today representing about 100 employees is looking for a better highway as a reason to stay here, to invest here, to grow here, and to employ people here. And it's not too much to ask at all, Mr. Speaker. And he is joined by several other businesses in the Vanguard area.

You know, Mr. Speaker, this government has gone to the extent of creating a Department of Rural Revitalization and there was a little bit about that in the Throne Speech as well. But, Mr. Speaker, I can tell you it doesn't take a Department of Rural Revitalization to convince people like Mr. Brown and other businesses in that area to stay. It simply takes some action. That's what it takes from this government. That's what we're asking for from this government.

In this case they're not asking for tax concessions. They're even willing to live, at least until the next election, with the restrictive labour laws that we have in our province. But they need a highway. There are other businesses there. I think of Bickner Trucking in Vanguard, that have just made a huge investment in a brand new shop, just a huge shop in that town, Mr. Speaker, and they employ about 24 to 25 truckers in the community of Vanguard. Under this government's restrictions on Highway 43, they will not even be able to run their empty trucks down the highway, Mr. Speaker.

That's the issue we were raising with the minister today in question period — my colleague, the member for Cypress Hills and the member for Thunder Creek. It's in the member for Thunder Creek's constituency. And so we asked earnest and serious questions on behalf of these businesses and, more importantly, on behalf of the families that they employ, the people they employ. And the answer they got back today in question period was . . . well it was a non-answer. They will continue to be ignored.

I think we will continue to make the case and I hope the government will respond appropriately in the future. Because there's Bickner Trucking and there's Trailtech manufacturing. There's another entrepreneur down there who's set up a welding operation. He has contracts with short-line agriculture manufacturers, and he's very worried because his clients don't really want to be running their brand-new equipment down to his welding and his manufacturing outlet on grid roads, Mr. Speaker. It just makes perfect sense that they wouldn't want that to happen.

So there's three businesses, existing businesses, that are simply looking for a highway, a road, as a reason to stay here in the province of Saskatchewan, and in that rural area that desperately needs those jobs. And there's one other business there, Mr. Speaker, it's called Notekieu Processing. They're just under way; they're going to be, I think, they're going to be processing pulse crops. And I just saw the advertisement in the *Booster*. They're going to be looking for a manager for their

operation. And they're worried, too. They're wondering if they located in the right place when they located in that rural portion of southwest Saskatchewan.

Mr. Speaker, you know the opposition hates talking about Alberta. And you know, I wish we weren't next to them either, frankly. As someone who is in the economic development area in the city of Swift Current for about five years, I'd rather they weren't our neighbours either. I'd rather be next to Newfoundland, although in most economic areas they're also now outperforming us here in the province of Saskatchewan. But the fact is, that's who we're next to. That's who we must compete with.

In Swift Current, when they look at things from the government like a Throne Speech or the budget that'll be coming up Friday, that's the test they use. Will this help us compete? Will this help us retain our young people and our businesses and the people that create jobs and wealth in our area? And the answer to the question, Mr. Speaker, is no. There's absolutely nothing in the Throne Speech, nothing that has come from this government certainly since the last election that would give those people hope.

We simply have to try, Mr. Speaker. We understand the difficulty of trying to catch up with a province that's had a 50-year head start. But we have to give these people in our communities, and in Swift Current especially, we have to give them the hope that there's a plan in place, that there's a long-term vision, that there's a government that understands that only by lowering taxes and being as competitive as we possibly can afford will we be able to grow our province, will we be able to create an environment for those businesses to want to stay, to stop planning their exit strategy, Mr. Speaker.

You know, you never . . . Mr. Speaker, the NDP (New Democratic Party) just doesn't seem to talk much about creating jobs. Certainly there's nothing in the Throne Speech. I think there's a reference to a summer jobs program where they completely exclude the small-business sector despite all their lip service that small businesses are the engine of the economy that create the most jobs, certainly no evidence of their belief of that in the Throne Speech by the job-creation measure that they outlined there.

Mr. Speaker, I just really wonder, when I look at the Throne Speech or when I look at previous documents, when I looked at the labour legislation that came forward from this NDP government last session, I wonder if they really understand the magic that happens when just one single job is created.

Mr. Speaker, it's the economic equivalent of conception. When just one job is created, there's an energy that's released. And that energy does many things. It provides for families. It saves for university. It invests potentially in another business. It supports charity. It brings ties. And yes, it pays taxes, Mr. Speaker.

That amazing act of job creation is what our entire system is dependent on, and when I speak of that I'm talking about health care and social services and the things that we have come to prize here in the province. And if you talk to these people who are considering an exit strategy, or even some who have already

left, they cite, I think, as the reason for their decision as the complete lack of ideas or hope coming from this government that things will change. They simply don't understand, this government simply doesn't understand, that the only lasting and most effective way to create jobs is to lower taxes: income taxes, property taxes, royalties, sales taxes, small-business taxes.

We simply must provide a long-term vision of achieving affordable tax relief, affordable tax relief in absolutely every area . . . (inaudible interjection) . . . Well the member from Regina Qu'Appelle says that there is absolutely no proof that lower taxes create jobs. That's what he just said from his seat, Mr. Speaker. If you can believe it, if you can believe it, in every single jurisdiction where it has been tried in earnest, it has worked. It has worked in Canada. It has worked in the United States, and believe it or not — he's shaking his head — but believe it or not, Mr. Speaker, it will work in Saskatchewan but only when the government changes, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Wall: — Only when the government changes. The Throne Speech is completely silent on this most important issue. It rehashes last year's budget when it comes to taxes.

On the sum and the total of its announcement on job creation, Mr. Speaker, is that student employment program I mentioned earlier which completely excludes the engine of the economy that, by their own admission, if you look in their campaign brochures, is the single greatest job creator in the province of Saskatchewan.

Apparently it is good enough for their election brochures, Mr. Speaker. It's good enough for their election-time hype, their credit to small business that they'll give it as the job creator, but it's not good enough for their Throne Speech. It's not good enough for their budget. It's not good enough for their action, Mr. Speaker, and that's the problem. That's exactly the problem with this government.

For the people in my constituency, they desperately are seeking some sign of a vision for our economy, some clear plan to meet the challenge of competitive tax structures. And there is nothing in this Throne Speech and nothing coming from the government on that count, Mr. Speaker. This Throne Speech frankly has more to say about blooming crocus flowers than it does about job creation or a long-term plan for the future.

There is nothing in the Throne Speech also, Mr. Speaker, about the burgeoning . . . well, the energy industry in the province of Saskatchewan. This government will benefit to the tune of hundreds of millions of dollars from the energy sector, but many of them will be surprised to know that in southwest Saskatchewan, there hasn't been a drilling rig there for some time, for months really. It's shocking when you consider the price of west Texas crude is where it's at.

The fact of the matter is . . . and this is what the oil companies have told us. They have said yes there is oil in the Southwest, and yes the price is right. But as long as Saskatchewan is the highest cost jurisdiction in which to explore for oil, we will go elsewhere, Mr. Speaker. That is what they have told us. That's

what they've said. It's a matter of public record. And save for a few areas of strategic importance to the major drillers here in the province, in the Southwest the wheels are not turning in the oil service sector. They're simply not turning. They need the government to be still more competitive with their royalty structures than they are.

They need the government . . . if they're not prepared to move on that, then, Mr. Speaker, they need some sign in the Throne Speech or some document from government that they're at least willing to enforce the same laws that our own service companies live by on service companies from out of province. They need to have some surety that the PST (provincial sales tax) that our companies have to deal with in our province is also being levied against out-of-province firms. It's not happening. We've asked the government that question. They say, well we don't have enough people to enforce it. Well they better get it, Mr. Speaker, because they're killing the goose that's laying their golden egg, that's single-handedly putting them in a surplus position, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, I've highlighted some major concerns as regards to the Throne Speech. But I do want to say this. As someone who has sat on the board, as a former board member of the TransCanada West Association, that the announcement in the Throne Speech about the expedition of the plan to twin the No. 1 Highway is very, very positive indeed for my community and for the entire Southwest and for the entire province. And for that . . . I'm sure the people are grateful for that. I know they were grateful when the member for Cypress Hills and our Highways critic raised this very plan to shorten that time frame in the last session during an emergency debate. And it's certainly a positive aspect of a Throne Speech that otherwise is a major disappointment.

(19:15)

Mr. Speaker, it's a disappointment because fundamentally it's a tired rehash of Romanow initiatives that have either already been announced with the possible exception of one program which is a federal program funded fully by the federal government.

Mr. Speaker, this past winter we watched . . . I'm sure everybody interested in politics in Saskatchewan watched the NDP leadership unfold. And I have to admit, Mr. Speaker, that on the day that they chose the member for Riversdale as their new leader, I watched the proceedings on television, further giving my wife concern that indeed I need to go out and get a life. But I pretty much watched the entire thing unfold. And I noted when that . . . (inaudible interjection) . . . Yes, apparently my colleagues are wondering if I might perhaps get a life as well, Mr. Speaker.

But I was very interested to see during the coverage of that convention that the television commentators would take some time to describe some background of the candidates vying for this position of Leader of the NDP. And I noted with interest, Mr. Speaker, that among the hobbies listed of the leadership candidates, the one that stuck out to me was the proclivity that our now Premier has with the renovation of buses, with the acquiring of old buses and the renovation of the buses, and I don't know maybe selling them, who knows, maybe at a profit

even after he's renovated . . . I don't know. I can't hardly imagine that that would be the case, but perhaps.

And so, Mr. Speaker, the Premier of all people should know that you can't fool people for even a little while by simply putting a new coat of paint on a rundown, tired, old bus. Right up until the time that you need that bus to take you somewhere, maybe somewhere important, that's when it will dawn on you, Mr. Speaker. When you go to start up that bus, that old, rundown bus that you simply put a new coat of paint on, it will become abundantly clear that without doing something major to the mechanics of the bus, maybe a major engine overhaul, it's just going to sadly let you down. It's not going to be able to take you where you need to go. And sadly, Mr. Speaker, this Throne Speech is nothing more than a new paint of coat on that . . . a new coat of paint on that tired, old, rundown bus that is the NDP government, Mr. Speaker.

The good news is that there are a whole number of members on this side of the House that are pretty handy with a wrench as it turns out, and I think we'll be able to fix the bus up given the next chance . . . given a chance in the next election.

Mr. Speaker, this Throne Speech that we're debating here today, and the coming debates that we're going to have in this House that will lead us to the next election, are absolutely crucial to the people of my constituency, to the people of Swift Current that I have the great honour of representing here. And they're important of course to everybody in the province. There is precious little time to lose. We need a long-term plan from a party that understands how to get the economy going, that understands the importance of job creation in a regime with the lowest taxes possible, Mr. Speaker.

And I can think of no better way to start down that road than to indicate to you tonight, and to my colleagues, that I will be supporting the amendment put forward by the Leader of the Opposition and seconded by the member from Melfort-Tisdale, and I will be voting against this woeful, inadequate Throne Speech, Mr. Speaker. Thank you very much.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Thomson: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is indeed a pleasure for me to stand once again in this Assembly, and in particular to address you, sir, who as members in this Assembly and certainly all of us know, has served very a distinguished and excellent service to our caucus on this side and now has the ability to do the same for our Assembly as a whole.

Mr. Speaker, I would be remiss if I did not of course point out that you have had a very important role in my life, having at one point taught me, it seems to me, grade 10 algebra. Just to let you know that I did learn a thing or two when I was in your class, I would note that your hat is an isosceles triangle, sir. That may be the extent of all I've learned in math, but I've learned a great deal also from you politically and I'm particularly pleased to have a chance to address you today in your new role as Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, I also want to congratulate my colleague from Sherwood who I was elected with at the same time into this House, as he becomes now the Deputy Speaker in this

Assembly. He too has served as well as our caucus Chair. And although he did tend to send me on a lot of pretty schlunky CPA (Commonwealth Parliamentary Association) trips, I nevertheless want to thank him for his always attentive eye when I was getting a little too out of control in the caucus. So congratulations also to him.

Mr. Speaker, it is a real pleasure to be here today. This is a very . . . I think in many ways an important moment in the Assembly but also in the history of our Province. And I think that the member for Swift Current started to talk about this a little bit tonight, and I want to pick up on that point, pick up on the theme, but I want to carry it forward in a somewhat different direction.

Mr. Speaker, we have a new bus. We have a new vehicle. We have a new team. We have a new theme. We have new energy. We are moving forward, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Thomson: — Mr. Speaker, I think all we need to do to point that out is simply take a look at this set of government benches versus that set of opposition benches. I would point out to you that not only do we have a new premier, not only we have appointed a new cabinet, but we have elected new members to this side. Today, Mr. Speaker, there are four of us on the government benches under the age of 40. Four of us under the age of 40. That is I think a good sign of what this province believes in, what the NDP believes in, and our commitment to seeing that this future is more than just empty words, hollow rhetoric, and tired-out Tory ideas.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Thomson: — Mr. Speaker, the members opposite have talked about a new paint job. Don't worry that there's a new paint job on the bus here because we see that no matter what colour they paint that vehicle over there — you can paint it green and gold if you want — it's still Tory blue.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Thomson: — And as Tory blue as it is, we know the books of this province are red because of the members opposite, and the people of Saskatchewan will never ever, ever forget that or forgive them.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Thomson: — Mr. Speaker, I think the members here have heard this speech from me before, and I won't go on at great length about it tonight because what I want to focus in on are some of the new initiatives, some of the new ideas, and some of the new approaches that this administration, that this premier has decided we will embark on.

And I'm very proud of it. I am very proud of what we are doing on this side. We have gone through an exciting time as New Democrats. We've seen thousands of people join our movement and rejoin our movement in terms of finding ourselves a new direction. We have reconnected with Saskatchewan people. We have reconnected with our grassroots, and we are stronger

because of it. The fact that 20,000 people would cast votes in our leadership convention to elect the member from Riversdale as the leader of our party I think speaks very well.

But I think what also speaks very well is the fact that we had not one, not two, but seven excellent candidates vying for that job — anyone of whom could of assumed the job of premier and done an excellent job. And I want to congratulate my colleagues in the caucus who've put their name forward for that; who advanced new ideas, and I think did a lot in terms of making sure that people understood that the real home for Saskatchewan people is here in the New Democratic Party. To each of them I say congratulations; and of course, to the new member for Riversdale, our returning colleague in this House, the Premier, congratulations very much on a job well-done.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Thomson: — Mr. Speaker, the members opposite I know have some difficulty in understanding how our party works. I know they have a difficulty understanding how we can have such a big tent to accommodate so many different ideas and views.

How is it that you can have pro-business people, how is it you can have strong union activists, how is it that we can have people committed from all sorts of different sectors of our society and encompass them all in one political movement? We're not simply the voice for the chamber of commerce, although we certainly represent their views. We're not simply the voice for the SFL (Saskatchewan Federation of Labour), although certainly they find home here as well. We're not simply the voice for farmers; not simply the voice for working men and women. We are the voice for Saskatchewan people and we have been for 40 of the last 60 years.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Thomson: — Mr. Speaker, when I look at this side of the House and I see the new member from Elphinstone, and I see my colleagues from other parts of Regina, and I see some of the new members that we elect in every single election, I know that we're going to be the voice for Saskatchewan people in the next 40 years as well.

One of the reasons for that, and I think the members opposite missed this because they think that we're a touchy-feely, social-gospel party only, the fact is — the fact is — that we understand how the economy works. We understand how to create jobs. We understand how the Saskatchewan people want to move forward. And it's not simply a hack and slash taxes at all cost as they have proposed. It's not simply as they talk about how you can deregulate your Crown corporations. It's not selling them off at fire-sale prices. That's what they believe. That's what they believe.

What we understand is that it is a combination of things that makes Saskatchewan a great place to live, that allows Saskatchewan people to create jobs, and allows Saskatchewan's young people an ability to stay here; to work here; to raise their families here; and believe it or not they're doing just that.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Thomson: — Mr. Speaker, many others will speak on different parts of this speech . . . of the Throne Speech. I want to address in particular tonight the comments related to the economic growth of our province and the future of our province.

I think it's important to note that the very first set of principles and statements laid out in the Throne Speech related to the economy, and they talked about a thriving economy. An economy that was described in the *Globe and Mail* as: "the star of Canada through the '90s."

Now the members opposite have fallen silent because they know they've heard this speech before. They don't like it when there's good news. They don't like it when we talk about the successes of Saskatchewan people. I have to say, I find it passing strange that in their communities that everything has just gone down the drain since they got elected. You never hear good news from them — never hear good news.

You'd never hear them stand up and celebrate the successes of the businesses in their community. You never hear them stand up and celebrate the successes of the non-government organizations. You never hear them celebrate the successes of their people who sent them here to this legislature. All you hear is doom and gloom — doom and gloom. It's all bad news, Mr. Speaker.

Now I think one of the reasons you don't hear anything positive from them is because they know that everything positive going on in this province is bad news for them, Mr. Speaker. It's bad news for the doom and gloom approach of the opposition.

Saskatchewan is healthy. Saskatchewan is strong. It has a good, solid, diversified economy. And it has a population who are finding prosperity; they're finding success; and they're finding that they have a place here in Saskatchewan to grow. Now I think we need to take a look, Mr. Speaker, at some of the different things that our government is proposing to do in terms of making sure we continue to move forward.

There's no doubt that things are a little bit uncertain in the world right now. We need only to turn on the television and watch what's happening on the TSE (Toronto Stock Exchange); watch what's happening in the United States. And we understand that the challenges — the challenges that come from a softening economy in the United States. I'm very happy that Canada is not following the US (United States) into that recession. I am very happy that Saskatchewan is not following the US into that recession.

And if the members opposite read what any of the economists across the country are saying, they are saying that it's likely that Saskatchewan is very well positioned to make sure we don't follow the US into that recession. Why? Because we have a good diversified base. Why? Because we've made smart investments in infrastructure. Why? Because we've made the investment in people who are the backbone of this economy so we have a labour force that can respond and can succeed and thrive through this time and, Mr. Speaker, they will.

(19:30)

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Thomson: — They will. I want to talk a little bit about some of these investments and I want to talk a little bit about some of the strengths of this province because I think the members opposite through all of the doom and gloom have missed it out.

The members may say and people watching on television may say, well that's their job is to be negative. That's their job to be negative. The members opposite should know full well that one of the important pieces of keeping the economy running is consumer confidence. Consumer confidence is based on the belief that things will continue to move forward, that there's a security that they can spend with relative certainty, and that there's a stable economy.

We are doing our best to make sure Saskatchewan people, when they make those decisions, are making them based on fact. Consumer confidence is in good shape. We have a variety of industries here in Saskatchewan. Certainly, one of them is in difficulty and has been for most of the last decade — that's agriculture and I want to talk about that a little bit later on tonight.

But I want to talk first and foremost about some of the things that we are doing to make sure that Saskatchewan continues to grow. Mr. Speaker, one of the great pleasures I have had since being elected in 1995 is to have the pleasure of voting for five consecutive budgets that have cut the tax rates in this province.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Thomson: — Five consecutive budgets. I say that I've had the luxury of doing that because I know it was the tough decisions made by the people in front of me, elected from 1991 to 1995, that allowed that to be so. I know there were tough decisions because they were tough times. But Saskatchewan people understood what we were doing. Saskatchewan people understood that we had to take control of our own destiny and they did that and they followed with us and we did it in partnership.

The result of that, Mr. Speaker, as we all know has been a series of tax cuts. I think it was described not that many weeks ago in Saskatoon, one of the business leagues was saying why aren't you guys doing more about that, why aren't you making a bigger issue about it. Did you know that Saskatchewan has the fastest falling taxes in Canada?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Thomson: — The fastest falling taxes in Canada. I think the only thing falling faster is the support for the opposition.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Thomson: — The fastest falling taxes in Canada. We've seen cuts to business taxes, we've seen cuts to income taxes, we've seen cuts to the sales tax. Even the member for Kindersley had to vote with us when we cut the sales tax. Even the member for Kindersley. You have to wonder, Mr. Speaker, why or whether that opposition party wouldn't have been better

off if they let him lead. At least he understood what was important to Saskatchewan people and he followed through with it.

Those tax cuts laid a foundation for us to build a better Saskatchewan economy. They allowed us to bring in business. They allowed us to see massive investments in infrastructure — not just government infrastructure, Mr. Speaker — a private sector infrastructure. The capital investments private sector companies have been making over the last several years have been above \$300 million a year in this province. Some years it's been as high as a billion dollars. We have seen a tremendous influx of capital.

Members opposite would let you believe, as the member for Swift Current was going on about tonight, that business wants nothing to do with this province. That's not true. That's not true.

One of the reasons the oil sector is doing so well, and one of the reasons our budget is doing so well, is because of the investment of companies in the oil sector in Saskatchewan. If you listened to them you'd think there was just tumbleweeds blowing across the prairie. You'd think that that's it — just tumbleweeds. That there's not a single oil well out there. You'd think that they're not pumping a single barrel. Well it's not true. It's not true.

And the only time you hear that concession from them is when we bring up the consolidated statements that show that the province has reaped some reward from that and then they say, well spend it. Spend it. Spend it faster. Spend more. Spend it not once, spend it not twice, spend it three times. For every one of them over there they seem to have two or three different ideas on how to spend the whole shot. But that's the only time you hear them say that the economy's functioning well.

You never hear them talk about the successes in the forestry sector. I can't remember the last time . . . I can't remember the last time I heard any of the members from the forest fringe stand up and say anything positive about what was happening in the forest sector.

I have not heard any of them stand up and talk about the benefits to their constituency. All we hear is gloom and doom, gloom and doom. Mr. Speaker, I think it's unfortunate. I think it's unfortunate that all members in this House cannot stand up and salute the successes of Saskatchewan people as we move forward.

And the fact that a so-called Saskatchewan Party refuses to do so is all the more repugnant. And I think that we need to make sure that the people of Saskatchewan understand exactly what's going on in this economy because things are going fine, thank you very much.

Mr. Speaker, this year alone we will see more than a \$300 million reduction in the income tax bill over what it was about a year and a half ago.

An Hon. Member: — How much?

Mr. Thomson: — By the end of the changes that we have

made, that this Assembly has voted for in terms of the income tax structure, we will see more than \$442 million a year returned to taxpayers.

An Hon. Member: — Oh, Lord, half a billion dollars, boys.

Mr. Thomson: — More than half a billion dollars . . . almost half a billion dollars, Mr. Speaker, that we have been able to return to Saskatchewan people.

Why have we been able to return that to Saskatchewan people? We've been able to return it because the economy is growing. We have been able to return it because we have more taxpayers. We've been able to return it because the investments we've been making are paying off. That's called sound financial management.

Saskatchewan today, Saskatchewan today draws the single lowest — the single lowest — proportion of its revenue from income taxes of any province in Canada. The member for Canora . . .

The Speaker: — Order.

Mr. Thomson: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I want to repeat this one more time. Saskatchewan today achieves the lowest, and I want to repeat this, the lowest — write this down, members opposite — lowest percentage of its budgetary income from income tax of any province, any province in Canada . . . (inaudible interjection) . . . Yes, that includes Alberta.

Mr. Speaker, we have been able to do that, we have been able to do that because we have invested wisely and because our revenue sources are not dependent solely on income.

The members opposite look dumfounded. These aren't my figures. These aren't the Department of Finance's figures. These figures are from the Canada West Foundation. It's not that hard to look up. They can simply look it up. This is a fact. This is a fact.

I am proud of the fact that we have been able to reduce income taxes for Saskatchewan people. I am proud of the fact that we have been able to return a dividend to Saskatchewan people for the hard work that they put in trying to clean up the debt left by the predecessors of their party. That's been the success that we've had in this government, one of the successes we've had in this province.

Mr. Speaker, we have also been able to see growth — growth in our economy without having to sell the farm. We have not had to give away our resources as the members opposite, time and again that I've been in this House, have advocated.

The member opposite from Swift Current tonight speaks about the oil companies. He talks about how, oh, the oil companies don't want to do business in his riding. He blames us; he blames the provincial government.

I think the member opposite should probably grab a bus ticket off to Calgary and go find out what they're really saying because what they're saying is not that they have a problem with the royalty regime. They're not having a problem with the

provincial government's taxation scheme. What they've got a difficulty with is dealing with various different municipalities. Access is the biggest problem.

If the members opposite talk to anybody in the industry, if the members opposite spent any time actually looking at the arguments before they put forward the rhetoric, they'd understand that. These are the problems we have in the industry, and yet even with that, even with that, Mr. Speaker, we have significant growth in terms of oil sector.

We have been very, very fortunate in this province that diversification through mineral wealth has been able to offset the losses that we've seen on the farm side. We have been very fortunate in our economy that we've been able to see a growth in manufacturing that has offset some of the losses that we used to see . . . or some of the benefits that we used to see from agriculture now that it is slumped.

We've been fortunate that we've been able to achieve additional provincial revenue to step in and help out those who have not been able to count on their traditional industries. We have been very fortunate that previous governments, previous members here on the NDP side . . . I noticed members here got worried that I was being too gracious to the members opposite. But that we have made wise investments and that when it was necessary, we stepped in and we did the right thing — not necessarily the politically expedient thing, but we did the right thing. And I think Saskatchewan people have appreciated that. Obviously they've appreciated that by returning us three times to the government side of this House.

Mr. Speaker, I want to talk a little bit about some of the Saskatchewan successes that we do have. I think it's interesting to note that the Year 2000 was a good year for Saskatchewan people. It was a good year in terms of Saskatchewan people finding work. The members opposite have spent a lot of time complaining about the opportunities for young people. It might interest them to know that in the Year 2000, the year just ended, 86,000 young people found work in this province; 86,000 young people between the ages of 15 and 24 were working in this province — 3,000 more than the year before.

But we hear nothing from them about that. To them, they want to tell these young people, well you're losers because you're still here. You're losers because you won't pick up and go to Alberta. Why would you invest in this province? Well they invest in this province because they believe in Saskatchewan, because they live here and they know the opportunities. They know the potential, and they know that this is home. Mr. Speaker, this is a success story for us — 86,000 young people working in Saskatchewan last year.

Mr. Speaker, it's also interesting to note that we've seen growth in employment in various sectors. Certainly the agriculture sector is hurting; there's no doubt about it. And we've seen this happen for years now as we've seen a decline. Forestry, mining, a 14 per cent increase last year — 14 per cent increase in terms of the number of people working in mining. A twelve and a half per cent increase in the number of people working in transportation. A 10 per cent increase of professional and technical services. A 7 per cent increase in health and social services.

Mr. Speaker, Saskatchewan people across the board are finding jobs here at home in the professions that they want to be working in. Is there more we can do? Absolutely. Is there more we're going to do? Absolutely. But, Mr. Speaker, as long as we sit on these government benches, I can tell you that our first commitment is not to simply sully the reputation of the province as the members opposite try to do. Our first commitment is to the people that sent us here and to the people frankly that sent them here. We will continue to look out for those people's interests.

Mr. Speaker, we have seen great expansion in our province. You listen to the members opposite and you think that business is fleeing in record numbers. This isn't true. You think that there's no new opportunities here. That's not true. The fact is that we've seen a real boost in terms of our manufacturing sector. Incidentally, a manufacturing sector that's not centred just here in Regina, a manufacturing centre that's not focused just in Saskatoon.

As the members opposite know, there's manufacturing throughout the small towns of this province. Manufacturing is one of the areas where rural Saskatchewan has been able to respond I think fairly effectively in terms of diversifying. It might interest them to know that three-quarters of the nearly 3,000 manufacturing firms — 3,000 manufacturing firms in Saskatchewan today, Mr. Speaker — three-quarters of those have fewer than five employees. These are the small businesses that we talk about. These are the small businesses.

They say the NDP has no interest in small business. Not true. We have small-business people on our government benches. We have an interest in small business. We have a pro-small-business tax policy. This is one of those sectors that we have done a great deal to invest in, whether it's through the partnerships with our Crown investments, whether it's through the support through our post-secondary institutions, whether it's through the support through the Department of Finance's tax policies. We are making sure Saskatchewan small business can stay and prosper here at home, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, and they are prospering. They are prospering. Production value increased this past year by 16 per cent. It accounted for over \$6.1 billion in 1999 and by over \$7 billion last year. A billion dollar growth in that industry alone.

The members opposite again are dumbfounded. They tell us they're in touch with their constituents and yet none of the success stories are brought forward. Where did that billion dollars come from? Well it came from good small businesses making smart business decisions. It came from being competitive. It came from good products. Oh yes, they think we can't say the word competitive for fear it will, you know, be banished.

(19:45)

I listened this morning or earlier this afternoon to the comments from the member for Wood River and I was appalled. I was absolutely appalled, Mr. Speaker, and we did our best to be polite recognizing it was his maiden speech, recognizing that he has served our country well. And what I was impressed with is the — to be very honest — I was impressed by the comments

afterwards by my colleague from Athabasca who I thought very eloquently addressed the issue by reminding members opposite and all members in this House that many of our parents, many of our grandparents, have served in the armed forces, both in times of war and in times of peace, and we are no communists.

We are no communists. We are Canadians and I think the members opposite forget that. If the members opposite forget that, then they should simply go and take a look at the members sitting here and review the *Hansard* of what the member opposite had to say about us.

Mr. Speaker, I understand that the member opposite was a distinguished pilot in the air force but I'll tell you, when I was listening to his speech, it sounded an awful lot like *Star Trek* to me, because he seemed to hit some kind of time warp that took him right back to 1950, right back to the Cold War.

Now I don't remember a lot about the Cold War. I was just barely . . . I think I voted in my second election by the time the Berlin Wall had fallen. And I want you to know, members opposite, that the younger members on this side, we remember the lessons from that time and we appreciate the work that was being done. But I can tell you that the Red scare that the member opposite from Wood River attempted to use today has no place and no time in this Assembly now or ever.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Thomson: — And I see the member from Rosthern opening his mouth. I see the member from Rosthern opening his mouth ready to say something and all I can say is that as I look at him, his colleague sitting on the bench next to him, the member from Maple Creek, I think he and the member for Wood River have more in common that you would think; and that commonality of course is that the member from Maple Creek has a fantastic tourist destination where people can go and take a look at T. Rex — Scotty, the T. Rex dinosaur. Well I would tell you, by listening to the speech from the member for Wood River, there's a dinosaur over there too.

And I just hope, and I just hope that the members opposite will sit down with that member and talk to him a little bit about what he had to say today because it was just appalling.

Mr. Speaker, I want to return to my comments about the economy and I want to turn to, in particular, some information in terms of how all Saskatchewan people really are sharing in the economic benefits of this province. The economists do something that they take a look at . . . the income inequality they call it. That's basically the difference between rich and poor, the gap between rich and poor. We all know about it. In Canada of course that gap has been growing .

I'm very pleased to tell members of this house that is not the case here in Saskatchewan. That we have in fact have made policies and programs which help make sure that people stay above . . . stay in step that the gap doesn't grow. We have the second, we have the second lowest income inequality in Canada. Only PEI (Prince Edward Island) has a narrower gap between rich and poor, and I think that's something we should be very proud of, Mr. Speaker.

Members should know though it doesn't just happen that way. It's not simply built into the economy. That's a result of conscious decisions we've made through things like the community schools program, things like the building independence program, things like the changes that we have done to make sure that people when they return to work, when they go from welfare to work, that their kids are able to stay out of poverty. Those are successes of programs in large part initiated by our new Premier when he was here in his previous capacity as a member of the cabinet.

And I think people have recognized that. I know the members opposite don't understand how is it that we can rack up nearly 60 percent of the vote in Elphinstone and then a week later do the same thing in Riversdale. It's because of that. It's because of the fact that we are committed to making sure every single person in Saskatchewan is heard and has a place and a role to play in this province.

It's not always to say that people don't fall behind. I think we all know that there are real problems in some parts of this province and we're working on that. Certainly the member for Cumberland and the member for Athabasca have spoken at length about some of the unique problems facing northern Saskatchewan, concerns incidentally that we never hear anything from the opposition on.

We've certainly heard from other members about some of the problems in smaller communities. We understand some of the problems that seniors are having.

But, Mr. Speaker, this government is working to put in place the programs that help make sure Saskatchewan people are looked after. And it's something we should all be very proud of.

Mr. Speaker, there's a great deal to the question of how you deal with the income gap. The taxation policy when we made the change a year ago was criticized by some saying it was too sweet for the rich, that there were too many people on the upper end who were going to see too much benefit.

It's a tough thing for us to do, to find that right balance between making sure we've got enough revenue to run the government, to run the programs that people are dependent upon — the programs the members opposite speak in great terms about our need to expand — things like spending on health care although of course in their policy at the election there was no new money for it. They talk about the need for us to put more money into education. Again, I don't believe there was any promise in their platform for new money.

We need to work hard to find that balance, Mr. Speaker, that balance that allows us to bring in additional revenue but still sets the tax rate at a point where we can encourage business to grow, where we can encourage young professionals to stay in the province, and where we can retain many of the skilled labourers that we have.

These are real challenges. I think we've found very much that balance. I think that the policies we've put forward have been very progressive in that sense and certainly over the years I've supported them. This Throne Speech builds on those. This Throne Speech builds on the great work that our province and

our government has done.

And I want to highlight in particular here in Regina some of the things that have happened which I think help make our city and our province remain very competitive, in particular the new investments in infrastructure that we've made over at the University of Regina. I don't know if the members opposite have had an opportunity to be over there lately but we have seen very significant growth in terms of this new research park that is being put up there.

I was very happy to attend earlier . . . or late last year, I guess — I was going to say earlier this year but I guess it was late last year — the opening of the new Petroleum Technology Research Centre. This is a real jewel for the campus and I think it really does speak to how we can move forward with the oil industry in our province.

We have always had the benefit of having companies come in and simply pull the oil out, take it off to other places for refining. We're fortunate now over the last 20 years, 15 years, to have the refinery here in Regina. We're certainly seeing new methods of making our oil patch of greater value through things like the CO₂ initiative down in Weyburn.

The Petroleum Technology Research Centre builds on that but it also attracts in some of the bright, the real bright lights in Canadian science and it helps them work with industry, work with government in terms of finding solutions to make this resource both more profitable but also last longer. And I think that this is a very important initiative on our part. I'm very happy with the investment the province has made into it.

Mr. Speaker, our commitment to resources though is not simply from the extraction standpoint. We are also committed to ensuring that there is a sustainable component to it. We're interested in not simply pulling every resource out and ripping down every tree for a quick profit. We're committed of course to the environment as well.

And I think in that regard we are showing again at the University of Regina how we can make that work with the announcement this past week of the new CO₂ test centre which will be focusing on greenhouse gases at the U of R (University of Regina). This is I think very appropriate that the greenhouse gas centre will be located in very close proximity to the Petroleum Technology Research Centre. People understand obviously, from listening to debates over the last several years around Kyoto and others, that this is an important issue. Greenhouse gases are an important issue to our environment. And there's certainly . . . the oil and gas industry, the petrochemicals, have a great deal to do with some of the problems that we are facing right now with CO₂.

The greenhouse gas centre, technology centre, that's open at the U of R will take a look at this problem, and I think again will serve to attract some of the brightest Canadian scientists in terms of working on the solution.

In that regard, I want to congratulate my Member of Parliament, Ralph Goodale, for the work that he has done in the Liberal government in Ottawa for ensuring that research dollars do come here to Regina. And I certainly want to congratulate the

ministers on our front bench who have done a great deal to make sure provincial money is leveraged as well to make sure that we see this benefit.

Mr. Speaker, Regina is not obviously the only beneficiary of these investments on our campuses. Certainly the Canadian Synchrotron in Saskatoon will be a great boon to Canadian science. It will be a great boon to the University of Saskatchewan, which is my alma mater, and a place I have great affection for still. And it is I think again a great testament to the foresight that our community leaders, our scientific community, our academic community, and our ministers have to making sure Saskatchewan's economy is more than simply a resource-based economy.

Mr. Speaker, I also want to talk tonight a little bit about how another set of investments fit into that economic platform. Those are our investments in our Crown corporations. Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to serve as the Chair of our Standing Committee on Crown Corporations. I am pleased to have spent many of the last several years in our caucus chairing the caucus's committee on economic issues. And I think that it's important that we highlight, because they are so much just a part of our everyday life, that we highlight some of the successes and some of the importance of these Crown investments to Saskatchewan.

This afternoon in question period members spend a great deal of time talking about energy rates. And indeed over the weekend there was a discussion about what the appropriate rate should be for our power through the independent review panel and over the next few days obviously we'll see how that turns out.

But I think as people sit and take a look at these issues and take a look at where we're at in Saskatchewan today and where other provinces are at in terms of how they've handled their energy sector, how they've handled their utilities, I think people will understand why it's so vital that we maintain Crown ownership in this province and in our utilities in particular.

We have . . . Let me start by saying we have one of the best telecommunications companies in the world — one of the best telecommunications company in the world — and that being of course SaskTel. SaskTel is an extremely good provider of telephone, of Internet, of high-tech services to Saskatchewan people.

It's successful in part because it's diversified. It's invested in new technology and new ideas. It's invested and it has shared its insight around the world to show what Saskatchewan can do and those investments have paid off — those investments have paid off. The members opposite always like to point to the failures of our Crowns but I think we need to remember their many successes.

I don't think we spend enough time celebrating the successes in this province and certainly SaskTel has had a lot to do with them. I appreciate the comment by the member from Cannington, and he'll know that while he and I were recently down in New Zealand on a study tour, which I hope to be able to report to the Assembly in due course, that he will know that SaskTel has an important role to play down in New Zealand

through its investment in Saturn Communications.

I can tell you, and I'm sure as the member for Cannington will know because we spent a great number of sleepless hours I'm sure sitting up staring at the television screen thinking it was noon back here when of course it was two in the morning there, that they need our help at least in terms of bringing in better television service. And I am sure that SaskTel through its work in Saturn will be able to do a great deal. I notice bipartisan support now on that, Mr. Speaker.

There are some places where we can just do good public service for people around this globe and that may be one of them. SaskTel has been a real world leader and it's something that I know people throughout the province feel very proud of in small towns as they see the SaskTel trucks and they know that it's local people working for this great company.

SaskPower is also another place, Mr. Speaker, where I think we can celebrate some of the successes. And it's here that I would draw the attention of members to the situation happening in Alberta. Several years ago, in fact about five years ago, there was an idea moving across North America that what we needed to go to was a deregulated energy market, that what we needed to have was we needed to free up the large utility giants, obviously SaskPower is not a utility giant, but the larger ones in the United States wanted to break themselves up and deregulate. They thought that this would increase their ability to maximize efficiency. They thought this was a way for them to find better capital investments for power generation which was becoming expensive. They thought it was a way to share resources between the various utility providers at greater efficiency.

(20:00)

Boy, were they wrong — were they wrong. All we need to do is turn on the television set and take a look at what's happening down in California as they go through rolling blackouts. All we need to do is to pick up the phone and talk to friends in Alberta and listen to the problems that they're having there in terms of both generations where they've got problems; of course we all know that there was threats of potential brownouts in Alberta this past fall. We know that there's a problem in terms of the extreme cost that's being rung up on utility bills as a result of the deregulation.

I think, Mr. Speaker, that this is a very good case study of what happens when government simply pulls back and pulls out of industry. Deregulation alone is not to blame for the problems that we have seen in terms of the electrical utilities. One of the problems is that we did not have utility companies across North America with enough capital to invest and make sure there was generation. That was one of the problems. And one of the problems was because of the pressure from shareholders.

One of the benefits of having SaskPower in Crown control and under the scrutiny of this Legislative Assembly is that we are able to make sure that the capital investments are able to be made. We are able to make sure that there is sufficient generating capacity. We are able to make that there is a policy framework which ensures the lights not only stay on in Saskatchewan but that Saskatchewan people can afford to flick

the switch. That's one of the great benefits of Crown ownership. And I think that's something we need to be proud of.

Now we have not taken the approach of our predecessors in terms of moving forward holus-bolus in terms of massive investments in new generating capacity. Instead what we have worked on is to build a partnership with private sectors. Private sector companies who have been able to generate power, relatively low cost, move it into the grid in terms of what their surplus is.

This has been very successful; of course we all know that to be either called non-utility generation, non-generation, or cogeneration which is probably its more common name. This has been a real success, in terms of us being able to make sure Saskatchewan people are able to have stability and security in their power supply. Something that we never thought we would have to worry about at the start of the 21st century. Whether you are flicking on your computer or your light switch or your television or your radio or your toaster in the morning, you just expect it to be there.

I think a lot of us have forgotten the lesson that our generation . . . that our parent's generation or our grandparent's generation went through when they were getting rural electrification. I know the members opposite always make fun of the former premier when he would tell the story about flying across the prairie and Tommy pointing out the new lights that had gone on. I wonder if maybe that message isn't going to resonate a little more with the younger generation that sits there and thinks, gee what about rolling blackouts, what about brownouts, what happens if I flip the switch and nothing happens.

Mr. Speaker, the good news is SaskPower is well positioned to make sure that doesn't happen. SaskPower is well positioned to do that because it has sufficient capital at its disposal to make sure that we can build generating, transmission, and distribution facilities. It has the policy levers of government in an integrated way to make sure we can work with private sector industry to make sure that the needs of the industries are met across the province.

I say this not only to toot the horn of the Crowns, but I say this because it's also important to our economy, Mr. Speaker. I was interested to read a story in *The Leader-Post* on December 21 of last year talking about the situation in Alberta, and in particular the situation as it was brought forward by a vice-president of one of their ironworks companies in Lethbridge. He was talking about some of the problems that they're having.

Obviously, as we know with IPSCO on our boundaries here in Regina, they're a large user of the electrical utility. It takes an awful lot of electricity to create steel. What we were seeing these people talk about is the fact that because of deregulation, because of that competition now that's been introduced into this system, and a little bit I'd say it's false competition but nevertheless competition, has driven up the price.

We've seen that many of these industries are no longer able to afford to do business — where? Believe it or not, in Alberta. They're not able to do business in Alberta. Why? Because they have not made sufficient investment in their infrastructure

because they deregulated and sold off their Crown investments. There was no foresight there in exchange for the quick gain.

Manitoba as we know is probably the lowest cost producer of electricity in Canada. Quebec would be perhaps a little lower at about two and a half cents per kilowatt hour. Alberta now, if you can believe it, has just capped theirs, has just capped the rate that their utilities can charge at 11 cents per kilowatt hour.

I'm not sure what exactly SaskPower's is at. I think it's probably about four and a half. I don't see the Minister of CIC (Crown Investments Corporation of Saskatchewan) handy to me who would have the answer to that. But what we know is that we are still able to produce relatively inexpensive electricity here and this is something which is good for Saskatchewan business.

It's good for Saskatchewan business to have SaskPower operating it because they're able to make the investment in infrastructure and they're able to do it under public scrutiny. The rate utility review panel has come forward with a proposal for a — I'm not sure what it is — I think a one and a half per cent increase in the rate. I'm a very strong supporter of the independent panel. I think it is important for us to be able to have experts to go in and take a look at what the Crown corporations request for in terms of rates, in terms of what the public believe the appetite is, in terms of being able to pay it, and then report back to the shareholders, report back to the government with a rate that they believe is fair.

I think that's a real benefit, and it's much better than the 45-day rate review process that we used to have in place. Members opposite will say, well it was their idea; they asked for it — whatever they may say. Mr. Speaker, the fact is we implemented it. The fact is I know that we are all relatively pleased with the way that this has worked, and I want to congratulate that panel for the work that they've done in each of the cases they've taken a look at.

Rates in this province, whether it's SaskPower, whether it's SaskTel, whether it's SaskEnergy, are among the lowest in Canada, and that is something we should be proud of. It's among the lowest in Canada because these are Saskatchewan companies with a Saskatchewan product working for Saskatchewan people. How else would it be?

Mr. Speaker, I don't want to go on at too great a length tonight, but I did want to highlight some of those points that I thought were extremely important for us to understand. We have a very strong economy. We have a very positive, I think, economic outlook. It's interesting that while the U.S. is looking at a recession, all other parts of the world are suffering in terms of potential recessions as well, Saskatchewan is still looking at a growth, at economic growth, real economic growth. And while it may be small this year, we know that that growth is going to continue to translate into jobs. We know it's going to continue to translate into opportunity, and we know that it is going to continue to mean security and prosperity for Saskatchewan people.

Mr. Speaker, I want to congratulate the Premier and his ministers on a job well done in this Throne Speech and in a job well done in making sure Saskatchewan people, rich or poor, of

all backgrounds, have a place in this province. With that, I will be voting against the amendment proposed by the Leader of the Opposition. I will be voting for the Throne Speech.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Allchurch: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, on behalf of the constituency of Shellbrook-Spiritwood, it gives me great pleasure to stand in this Assembly today to bring forth some concerns of my citizens in regard to the Throne Speech. But before I go on, I would like to take this time, Mr. Speaker, to first of all congratulate you in your new role as Speaker. I also want to take this time to congratulate the member opposite from Regina Sherwood in his role as Deputy Speaker. I also want to congratulate both you two, especially you, Mr. Speaker, for standing up and making sure the democratic process is served by having your name sent in for Speaker. Both you did that, and it's the way the democratic process should be. For Speaker, it not should be by one person designated who should be the Speaker. So congratulations to both of you for doing that.

Mr. Speaker, the Throne Speeches are kept . . . are meant, pardon me, to set forth some sort of legislative agenda for the government and give the people of Saskatchewan a sense of where the government wants to take the province. This is particularly true when there's a new government or in this case a new Premier. However those wanting to get the sense of where this government is going was disappointed by the Speech from the Throne. Mr. Speaker, this Speech from the Throne does not give no vision and does not give no direction. This speech, Mr. Speaker, is basically a rerun of last year's speech given by the Premier Roy Romanow.

In economic development, a thriving economy in our province according to them is strong and growing. Well if it's strong and growing, it must be in rural Saskatchewan because it's sure not in rural Saskatchewan. According to the figures here — and these figures are so stifling and blinding I actually had to put my glasses on — there were 485,000 people working in Saskatchewan last year which is an increase of approximately 5,000.

Well, Mr. Speaker, I know in my constituency there are many, many kids that work from Spiritwood and area in the province of Alberta. Many people do that, and they travel back and forth on the weekends. Are those kids that are working in Alberta still classified as Saskatchewan-working people?

I would like to go on and talk about job creation, job creation in Saskatchewan. New figures released today — actually this is dated March 9 — by Statistics Canada show that Saskatchewan lost 13,200 jobs last year. Meanwhile, every other province had an increase in job creation.

While Saskatchewan lost 13,200 jobs, Mr. Speaker, Manitoba added some 7,000 and Alberta created 42,000 new jobs. Not only are they creating new jobs, they are buying services from Saskatchewan.

Mr. Speaker, in rural Saskatchewan the government says that it has created a new office of Rural Revitalization, to support economic development in rural Saskatchewan. Mr. Speaker, there will be no growth if there are no jobs. And if there's no

jobs, there's no people there. So why do we need rural revitalization?

There's a sign just outside my constituency, going west, and the sign says: go west young people to the land of milk and honey. Go to Klein's world. And that would be Ralph Klein's world.

Also in rural Saskatchewan, the new government came out with the Saskatchewan Conservation Cover Program. Well to many of my constituencies who phoned me and talked about this, it was a joke and they laughed about it. They said it should be called the lawn cover program because many of my constituencies who are farmers have lawns that are bigger than 50 acres.

In northern Saskatchewan, Mr. Speaker, in northern Saskatchewan the government is working with communities in northern Saskatchewan to connect them to the future. Well a while ago, my member from Saskatchewan Rivers and the Leader of the Opposition took a drive up to northern Saskatchewan. We ended up in Mr. . . . pardon me, the member from . . . Minister of SERM (Saskatchewan Environment and Resource Management) constituency.

And when we were up there . . . we were actually impressed with the highway going up because we heard horror stories that the highway going up was in bad shape. But really, Mr. Speaker, at that point in time it wasn't. But since then we've been up there a second time and it's been full of potholes just like it was the first time.

(20:15)

When we travelled to the Northwest, Mr. Speaker, what an eye opener — what an eye opener. And the Leader of the Opposition also said, what an eye opener. And it was. What a social-welfare society up there, Mr. Speaker. I couldn't believe it. Them poor people up there. They need housing; desperately need housing. They need housing because there's children up there having children.

And talking with some of the members of the band at La Loche, they said you know, we bought a sawmill, we have able-bodied people up in La Loche that could do the work and saw the lumber and make the houses. But you know something? We can't even go out and cut a Christmas tree for the simple reason Mistik owns all the power to the trees. That's why it's such a social-welfare place up there.

It also states in forestry that there was 10,000 jobs going to be created. Well this is the same as it was last year, and the same Speech from the Throne, that they were going to create 10,000 jobs in forestry. It's not happening.

An Hon. Member: — That's consistency.

Mr. Allchurch: — That is consistency. You are exactly right. Zero for zero.

In the forestry industry, Mr. Speaker, the new . . . the government just signed a contract up at Chitek Lake which will allow a mill to be built and it will be utilized to harvest and look after the salvaged timber. Well they forget, Mr. Speaker, that

just a short time ago up in Meadow Lake that there was a mill up there called the Clearwater mill. And that mill was shut down because they couldn't get access to this timber. And it was set up for salvaged timber also. So why promise people at Chitek Lake the same thing that just failed — and that's only 45 miles from where they're building one. That's what's good in forestry, promises, that's all.

I'd like to also talk about in the lumber industry. An official from Weyerhaeuser Canada says Saskatchewan cannot afford being affected by whatever replaces the 5-year-old US-Canada softwood lumber agreement that expires at the end of this month, in just a few more days. Saskatchewan dimension lumber exports were not part of this previous deal signed in 1996, which was aimed at placing quotas on the exports from four main producing provinces. The deal imposes heavy duties on exports beyond the annual quota; a deal Canadian producers say is unfair. Ottawa has said it will not redo this contract. The previous softwood lumber agreement targeted British Columbia, Alberta, Ontario, and Quebec. It did not target Saskatchewan as we speak yet. Weyerhaeuser is the province's biggest exporter of dimensional lumber such as two-by-fours and two-by-six studs from mills at Carrot River, Big River and the jointly-owned Wapawekka Lumber Company mill at Prince Albert.

An official, Mr. Speaker, speaking on background only, agrees that even though Saskatchewan is a major player in the softwood exports, there's an expectation Saskatchewan will no longer be immune. The provincial official also says that if a trade action is launched Saskatchewan will be expected to fill out a questionnaire produced by the investigation working in the US commerce department.

Mr. Speaker, our view of forestry is that no new jobs — no new forestry jobs — as the government said there will be 10,000. There are no forestry jobs. So maybe let's save existing ones. Just before the last provincial election Saskatchewan people were treated to a series of optimistic announcements about forestry. Partnerships between forestry companies and Aboriginal groups would create thousands of jobs, then . . . and when Economic Development minister, member from Idylwyld, promised . . . two years later the question is, where are the jobs? Where are those projects? Where even is the word allocation that would allow existing jobs to continue?

The forestry plan of the NDP government has become nothing more than a dream. Just a dream, Mr. Speaker. Nothing more than wishes of a party wanting to believe that it could do something dramatic to turn around the fortunes of a province and win itself the confidence of another . . . confidence of northern people. A short time ago, Mr. Speaker, it barely achieved the second goal, never mind the first.

A local sawmill operator, Carrier Forest Products, said that we'll have a look at packing up the equipment and moving out if it cannot get an allocation. The company came to Saskatchewan in good faith several years ago and has provided about 60 jobs for people in Prince Albert area. And, Mr. Speaker, you know all too well what I'm saying. It had plans for a finger joint plant to give further value to the wood products from the sawmill.

Without an Aboriginal partner, however — and the company has tried to find one without success to date — it cannot receive a timber allocation and must purchase private wood. That is not enough to maintain a business. There must be a steady, secure supply of raw material to continue operating.

And what of the partnerships that were announced two years ago? For the most part, they are stalled in financing arrangements and delays due to the depressed forest product markets. The forest allocated is not being cut. That might cheer the ardent environmentalists but it does not do nothing to provide paycheques to northern people. Carrier and Prince Albert deserve better than a lip serve received from Saskatchewan Environment and Resource Management. Also, Mr. Speaker, Ainsworth, a lumber company, also quoted and said, we cannot do business in Saskatchewan any longer. We cannot work with the government. It's time to pull out.

Prove to us, Mr. Speaker, prove to us that there is something in this truth and the promises made in '99 about the wonders of the new forestry plans for the province. If the province can't deliver the new jobs yet, then at least make sure that the jobs already aren't lost for the sake of bureaucracy.

I'd like to turn myself on to economic planning. In my constituency, in Saskatchewan, the economy, they say according to the government, is strong and growing. "My government will make strategic investments in people and infrastructure connecting to a prosperous future." Well, Mr. Speaker, in my constituency, a group of people from Parkside dealing with hemp — not marijuana, hemp — decided to grow this business. They went to the government; they went to Sask Ag and asked if they would help. Well after a number of years of talking with them, nothing happened.

Finally a group from Alberta, a group from Alberta — Alberta Ag — contacted them to come visit them. And they went there and sat down, told them of their plan, and, Mr. Speaker, as we speak now, they are working with hemp but it is all done in Alberta. Not in Saskatchewan. Not in Parkside, my constituents, where it should have been taken.

Mr. Speaker, they also put in the speech connecting with young people. Connecting to young people means connecting to the future for there they will shape the future of our century. Well, this is true, Mr. Speaker, very true. They are right. But the young are moving out, Mr. Speaker. They are moving to Alberta and elsewhere because you know why? That's where the jobs are.

I recently heard in my constituency that a nurse, an RN (Registered Nurse), who has been trying to find a job in Saskatchewan, in my constituency, found a part-time job, has recently been offered a job in Alberta. And listen to this, Mr. Speaker. She's going there for two years — she signed a contract for two years — and she is getting a bonus, a signing bonus of \$8,500. They are also going to move her free of charge. Well what more can you say when this lady says I'm going to Alberta and get this kind of a bonus. More nurses of the same are going to do the same and go there. Why not?

That's where our young people are going. They are going where the money is. They're going where the jobs are. This

government here has not created jobs in this province. When the young people leave, the tax bases leave.

And the Leader of the Opposition has constantly harped on the government about cutting taxes. Cutting taxes will increase the economic growth in Saskatchewan but it's never going to happen. Not with the government we have today.

Also in the Speech from the Throne, Mr. Speaker, it talks that, "My government will introduce *The Métis Act*." Well this is close to me and I am very interested in it. But until I get a draft of it, I have no idea what's coming down the pipelines. But I would really hope that this Metis Act is far different from the federal government Indian Act. And I see the member from Northern Affairs nodding and I'm sure he agrees. I hope it doesn't have anything to do with the Indian Act because that is one of the main reasons why those people are hindered is because of the Indian Act.

In conclusion, I would be remiss if I didn't talk a little bit about agriculture. During the 1999 election and subsequent Speech from the Throne, the NDP promised at long last to bring in a much needed safety net program for Saskatchewan farmers, something our province has been without since GRIP (gross revenue insurance program) was cancelled. However since then nothing has been done and the issue has not been risen in the Throne Speech either. Any time the agricultural crisis seems to be raised by this previous government . . . or this present government is if there is an election coming on. That's the only time.

Once again, the NDP has turned its back on the past promises and rural Saskatchewan. You know, Mr. Speaker, there's an old saying; you never slap the hand that feeds you. And in this case, Mr. Speaker, don't slap the hand of the farmers because they're feeding this province.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Allchurch: — The government of today is not slapping the farmers. They're also kicking them. If you keep kicking something, soon it will not get up. If this government soon doesn't quite kicking rural Saskatchewan, it won't get up. It will do what most of them have done and that is move out.

Mr. Speaker, I will not be supporting the Speech from the Throne but I will be supporting the amendment put forward by the Leader of the Opposition. Thank you.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

(20:30)

Ms. Higgins: — Well, Mr. Speaker, how quickly time flies. It seems like no time ago that we were here during our last session with our differing backgrounds, varying ideologies, and very contrary ideas on significant issues. Here we are, all the elected representatives, gathered to turn our attention to dealing with the people's business. I am confident that each of us have at heart the best interests of not only the people we serve but also the best interests of our province.

Now it's with a great deal of pleasure that I have this

opportunity to address the Speech from the Throne but, Mr. Speaker, before I begin, I would like to take a few minutes to express my congratulations to you on your newly elected position. This House has voted its confidence in you and I'm sure that confidence is well placed.

Mr. Speaker, besides a congratulations, I would like to pass on a heartfelt thank you for the many times that you have given freely of your time and experience over this previous 16 months to help many of us newer members of this Legislative Assembly through the maze of rules, regulations, and protocol. Your advice has been invaluable and greatly appreciated, and we look forward to your continued guidance as you place your mark on this Legislative Assembly in your new role as Speaker.

And I would also like to pass along a congratulations to the member from Regina Sherwood . . . wherever he is. Oh, there he is. Congratulations on your election.

Now, Mr. Speaker, the Throne Speech spoke of this government's plans and vision for the future of our province to continue to build on our successes and to initiate new programs to enhance the lives of all Saskatchewan residents. A new beginning, Mr. Speaker. As spring creeps over this wonderful province of ours, we look forward to a year of growth and productivity, both personally and throughout the province, expanding that connection to the future — a future of prosperity.

Many changes have taken place over the last few months. Not the least of which was our selection of a new Premier from a very impressive list of New Democratic candidates. These candidates travelled throughout our province during the leadership campaign, meeting with the people of Saskatchewan and beginning that important step of reconnecting with those very same citizens. Citizens, Mr. Speaker, in every walk of life and sector of our economy. In return those citizens gave a resounding vote of confidence to our present New Democratic government and our new Premier. Mr. Speaker, the residents of Regina Elphinstone responded to that new beginning and renewed connection in the by-election held in their constituency. I would like to take this opportunity to congratulate our new colleague from Regina Elphinstone on his victory.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Ms. Higgins: — In a short time in this House he has shown himself as an able representative. I'm sure he will serve the people of Regina Elphinstone with dedication and diligence. Congratulations, and I look forward to spending many years in government with this hon. member.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Ms. Higgins: — Mr. Speaker, this vote of confidence and renewed connection with the people of Saskatchewan was again displayed in brilliant fashion when our new Premier was elected as the MLA for Saskatoon Riversdale. Despite negative, American-style tactics on the part of one candidate and the party he represented, and articles in the media talking about a campaign of nice guys, the people of Saskatoon Riversdale recognized the real substance of our new Premier and elected

the best candidate as their new MLA.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Ms. Higgins: — Mr. Speaker, I have read some quotes from the opposition before and during the Riversdale by-election stating that the by-election was an excellent opportunity for the people to express their opinion of the representation they have received from the New Democratic government, a report card, so to speak, on our government's performance.

Well, Mr. Speaker, I agree with the opposition 100 per cent. This was a wonderful opportunity for the people to express their opinion and they expressed in a most definite manner. Two by-elections; two wins. It's a report card, Mr. Speaker, we are proud to show anyone, any time — straight A's.

Mr. Speaker, now this isn't all good news. There is a wee bit of sadness in Moose Jaw. We in Moose Jaw have known for a number of years that this man, our Premier, who was born and raised in Moose Jaw Wakamow, is a man of integrity, intelligence, and dedication. He has a great deal to contribute to our province. We also know that we no longer have a monopoly on his time or energy, for he is now truly our provincial leader and Premier of the province of Saskatchewan. While we may be a little bit sad to lose a remarkable citizen of our city, Moose Jaw congratulates the new member of the Legislative Assembly for Saskatoon Riversdale. We know he is the right man to lead Saskatchewan.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Ms. Higgins: — Mr. Speaker, I'm proud to represent the people of Moose Jaw Wakamow. Our city has come a long way over the past few years. Our city's story of success is well-known right across North America — from a city losing business and opportunity to a city with world-famous tourist attractions, the NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) flight training centre, art galleries, the world-famous tunnels, museums, murals, and a thriving hospitality industry.

Mr. Speaker, some might expect that to be the end of our story, that the people of Moose Jaw would stop and be happy to rest on their laurels, just take it easy for a while. Mr. Speaker, nothing could be farther from the truth. This journey that Moose Jaw has embarked on is growing every day. Our citizens' dedication and commitment to our city is boundless. Their dreams and ideas for projects are limitless. There isn't a day go by that I'm not amazed by the people within our community. Plans to revive and restore our colourful history on River Street are well underway. Authentic building facades, an outdoor amphitheatre for period productions, expansion of the famous Moose Jaw tunnels, and plans for a cultural arts centre, are all in the works.

Mr. Speaker, the change in Moose Jaw physically has been nothing short of remarkable. The change in the attitude of our citizens is phenomenal. We began our connection to the future of prosperity through our past but, Mr. Speaker, we are a city where the sky is the limit.

The theme of our Throne Speech, connecting to the future of prosperity, began with the commitment by this government to

listen closely to people and a commitment to being a partner with them in creating a prosperity that provides opportunity for all. That connection to the future of prosperity will be made by focusing on three areas: a thriving economy; healthy citizens, families, and communities; and finally, responsive and effective government.

Mr. Speaker, in spite of tough times in the agricultural sector, the economy of our province is strong and growing. The average growth rate for the Saskatchewan economy from 1992 to '99 was 3.4 per cent, matching the Canadian average and ranking third highest amongst the provinces. Exports, manufacturing shipments, oil and gas production, production of potash and other minerals, and retail sales, all show increases. Saskatchewan's labour force has increased and our unemployment rate in January 2001 was the third lowest in Canada.

Mr. Speaker, these are all positive indications of a strong and growing economy. We will achieve even greater success with investments in technologies, the information highway to ensure Saskatchewan communities are connected to high-speed Internet services, a community infrastructure with investments in our municipalities, increased expenditures in rural Saskatchewan on research and development, and transportation by embarking on the largest ever highway renewals program.

Mr. Speaker, healthy citizens, families, and communities are also a focus of the Throne Speech. It is our government's responsibility to ensure that every person can enjoy the fruits of prosperity. Early childhood development programs will be expanded and labour standards will be amended to increase maternity and parental leave provisions. Both of these commitments emphasize the importance of, and our government's commitment to, our families and our children.

Mr. Speaker, our government's intention to expand community school programs and to significant investments in renovating, expanding, and building new schools and post-secondary facilities was also highlighted. Along with the implementation of the five-year centennial summer employment program, this government stressed the importance of our youth — youth who will be the leaders of tomorrow.

Mr. Speaker, of great importance to us all will be the report and recommendations of the commission on medicare to be released this spring. This government will listen to feedback from communities and stakeholders and then make appropriate changes to ensure that our health care system works well for the people of Saskatchewan.

Mr. Speaker, I've heard over the last few days people who believe this Throne Speech has no vision or plan for Saskatchewan. I just shake my head and wonder, Mr. Speaker, and I challenge these people to think out of the box, re-read the Throne Speech, or maybe read it for the first time with an open mind and see all the possibilities laid out for our citizens and province.

Mr. Speaker, we recognize the links between the quality of our environment, the strength of our economy, and the health of our people. This government is dedicated to providing responsible and effective administration. Saskatchewan citizens expect and

deserve no less.

Mr. Speaker, I will be opposing the amendment and supporting the Throne Speech.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Ms. Eagles: — Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. And before I begin I would like to congratulate you on your position as Deputy Speaker, and I would also like to congratulate the member from Prince Albert Carlton on his election as Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, as I prepared my speech to last week's Throne Speech, I thought that perhaps I should just find last year's response; I know that you have heard it before, but it would not be any different that this year's Throne Speech. We've all heard it before.

None the less, Mr. Speaker, I'm happy to reply to the Throne Speech on behalf of the constituents of Estevan. Mr. Speaker, Estevan is a constituency of vast grain fields, oil fields, Boundary and Rafferty dams, coal mines, the Souris Valley Theatre, and the Johner Brothers.

Mr. Speaker, this Throne Speech is totally uninspiring, totally lacking in vision, and optimism. This NDP government that 60 per cent of the people of this province voted against in 1999 promised the creation of 30,000 jobs last year. And what happened to all of those jobs, Mr. Deputy Speaker? We actually lost 13,000 jobs last year.

The promise of strength in regional hospitals failed as beds are closing. The promise of reduced waiting times for surgery failed, as the waiting lists are getting longer. Mr. Speaker, just the other day a constituent called me. This gentleman was extremely frustrated as he explained to me how his son who is an engineering student at the University of Saskatchewan had broken his ankle on March 13. This injury required a pin to be put in his ankle, but guess what, Mr. Speaker? He has to wait until a bed is available to have the surgery done. He was told possibly — and I stress possibly — he may get it done on March 28. That's over two weeks after the accident, Mr. Deputy Speaker. People waiting for hip and knee replacements have been neglected by this government's wellness plan as usual.

Mr. Speaker, the agriculture crisis is going from bad to worse. We have heard stories from all the instant authorities on agriculture on the government side. Their stories remind me of the song, "Chasing the Neon Rainbow." On this side of the House, Mr. Speaker, most of the members are directly involved in agriculture, and I do not mean visiting a cousin's farm. And to the members on this side, the song "Here in the Real World" comes to mind.

(20:45)

Mr. Speaker, every year since 1992, the year GRIP contracts were torn up by the government opposite, the NDP has been promising farmers a long-term safety net program. Every year since 1992, except for this Throne Speech, they have never acted upon it and are obviously backing down.

The details of the Conservation Cover Program which the

Throne Speech says, and I quote, “will provide direct payment to farmers.” Well, Mr. Speaker, the details were released last week, and this will pay farmers \$15 an acre, a minimum of 5 acres and a maximum of 50 acres. The most you can get from this program is \$750.

Do you know what the farmers in my area are saying, Mr. Speaker? They are saying that if this was not so dim-witted, it would be laughable. That won't even pay their increased energy and power bills or their high-speed Internet hook-up. And if the members opposite ever visited the rural areas, like they claim they do, they would know that is what the people out there are saying, Mr. Speaker.

The farmers need a concrete program, a bankable program. The member from Saskatoon Meewasin says, and I quote, “there is no such thing as an instant solution.” She also states that, quote, “the Saskatchewan Party is looking for (an) instant win . . .”

Mr. Speaker, the farmers of this province have been waiting a long time for this government's long-term safety net. And I do not believe that a nine-year wait qualifies as instant.

Mr. Speaker, every month and year that goes by, we lose more and more farmers. People that produce the highest quality grains in the world are going broke. Almost everyday there is an auction sale scheduled this spring — people having to get out. In the RM in which I live, there are almost a hundred quarters of land for sale, young farmers quitting because they just cannot go on. A few of the farmers who thought they were fortunate enough to receive AIDA (Agricultural Income Disaster Assistance) cheques have now received letters asking for repayment, plus interest.

The members opposite constantly point their fingers when blaming. And I say to them; when you want to see who's to blame, look in the mirror.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Ms. Eagles: — We got the blame for negotiations regarding AIDA while their Minister of Agriculture was holidaying in Mexico. The people of this province were so fed up that they gave him a permanent holiday, as they did many other members that used to sit on that side of the House. And those constituencies are now represented by Sask Party, Mr. Speaker. And why? Because the people of this province have had it with empty promises, promises from a government that does not deliver.

Mr. Speaker, the farm economy affects every sector in this province. Whether it be the grocery store in Midale, Bienfait, or Torquay, or the implement or car dealership in Estevan, they all feel it. And we have to work together on this one.

Mr. Speaker, I won't prolong this. I realize that there are several other people waiting to respond to the Speech from the Throne. But I would like to say how honoured I am to represent the constituents of Estevan, and the trust that they have bestowed on me is very humbling.

And, Mr. Speaker, in closing, the member from Regina Qu'Appelle criticizes the Saskatchewan Party for their

candidates in the last provincial election. But I ask the member, where are his candidates? We beat them.

And with that, Mr. Speaker, I cannot support the Throne Speech but I will be supporting the amendment put forth by the Leader of the Official Opposition, the member from Rosetown-Biggar.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Harper: — Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Mr. Deputy Speaker, it's truly a pleasure for me to rise and to participate in the Throne Speech debate here on behalf of constituents of Regina Northeast.

First of all I want to congratulate the Speaker on his recent election to the role of Speaker in this House. We all know that just by his nature he will provide us fair and reasonable and quality judgments from that chair and I really appreciate that.

And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I'd also like to congratulate you on your election as the Deputy Speaker. We know that you have those same traits and will continue in the footsteps of very hon. Deputy Speakers who have gone before you in providing fair and quality decisions from that chair in your role.

I also want to take this opportunity to congratulate the new member from Saskatoon Riversdale and the Premier on his recent election in Riversdale, and I know that we all — and when I say that, not just only the members from this side of the House but I'm sure many of the members from that side of the House — will know that he is certainly the man for the hour, the man that will lead us into the new millennium with a vision, a new vision of prosperity and opportunity for this entire province.

I also want to congratulate the new member from Elphinstone on his recent election to this fine House. I suppose, Mr. Speaker, when he spoke in his maiden speech here and he informed us that he was born in 1972, he made many, many of us very envious. I've had the pleasure of knowing the member from Elphinstone for a number of years now, first working with him in the federal election in 1997 and then having him as a colleague of mine from '97 . . . for about two and a half years from '97 until September '99, as a co-worker in the Member of Parliament's office in . . . I was in Regina and he was in Ottawa. And of course we were working for Lorne Nystrom who is the Member of Parliament for Regina Qu'Appelle.

During that period of time I really got to appreciate the member because not only is he a very sharp, young, bright individual, he also has a very, very big and compassionate heart. And I know, I know, Mr. Speaker, that in my conversations with the member that he really enjoys the view of this House from these benches. And I can assure you, Mr. Speaker, as I've assured him that he'll enjoy that same view for decades to come.

But it's truly a pleasure for me to stand here and represent the fine people of Regina Northeast. The constituency is a unique constituency, Mr. Speaker, as it is a constituency I think that has a good cross-section of the community. The boundary lines of the constituency is Albert Street to the south . . . to the west, Victoria Avenue to the south, for all intents and purposes Winnipeg Street to the east. It goes all the way out to the end of

the city limits and includes Uplands.

So it's a large constituency, and I say it's unique because it has over 900 businesses in my constituency. And it represents . . . it's a good cross-section of the community. So I have the opportunity of representing some very, very fine people.

Mr. Speaker, a couple of weeks ago I had the opportunity to attend citizenship court that was held at M.J. Coldwell School which is in my constituency. My first opportunity to attend citizenship court, and I found it very, very moving. Her Worship the Lieutenant Governor was there to preside over the court proceedings, and there was 25 new Canadian citizens who received their citizenship that day.

And I was very pleased to be there and to take part in it, but there was one aspect of it that really moved me. There was a lady, I would say middle-aged probably a lady that came forward to received her certificate and the pins from the federal representative and a pin from myself the provincial representative. She was smiling, Mr. Speaker, with a big, broad smile that's very hard to describe. The same time there was tears coming down her cheeks.

That made me think, Mr. Speaker, that how much we in Canada here and in Saskatchewan here take the citizenship of this great country and this great province so much for granted. And I think it's something we should give some thought to on occasions as we perhaps in our life feel that we're being hard done by or experiencing some difficulties that there are people in this world that fight and die for the right to vote. There are people who go through untold perils in order to escape the oppression that they are living under in their home country simply to come to Canada to enjoy the freedom that we have here.

And one has to think about these folks and the changes that they must go through to leave their homeland, in many cases their family, to come to a strange country with a strange and different language. And to do all that, they have to be prepared to accept change in some of the . . . in a very grand manner.

And change, Mr. Speaker, is something that's about us all the time. We experience change from day to day. We experience change in our life in many aspects. Change is what government is all about. Government is to manage change, so it has positive effects on citizenship. We have seen a fair amount of change in our lifetime, Mr. Speaker. And somebody once said that the amount of change that we have seen in the last 100 years, we'll see that much change again in the next ten. And I believe that's to be true because if you look at our history, the amount of change . . . and there's always been change in history, but never more than presently. We're seeing change and very rapid change. We're seeing change particularly in technology. We're seeing change in communications.

And I'm sure many of us can think back not all that many years ago that when we were looking for entertainment, we would turn the TV on and at best, we would get what? Two, maybe three channels? And if we wanted to watch a movie, we'd have a choice of watching the late movie on TV, or we could go to a theatre and watch a movie there. And at that time, if somebody would have told us that we would soon have the ability to go to

a corner store and for a couple dollars, rent a little plastic box and plug it into a machine and could watch a full length movie without commercials, we would have probably thought they were smoking something strange.

But that came to be, Mr. Speaker, and today we have even more rapid change between cable and satellite TV. We have the ability to watch a sporting event happen halfway around the world and watch it instantaneously. So we're seeing some fairly massive changes in our society and in our ways of communications.

In fact in recent years . . . and we all, I'm sure, have a cellphone, and we all use that cellphone as part of our duties. We now have the ability to get our e-mail messages on our cellphone. So we're seeing some very, very rapid change. And change has very positive, very positive effects to it if it's managed in the best interest of the people. Government has a responsibility to help manage that change, and thusly, Mr. Speaker, we're moving forward to meet those challenges. We're moving forward in expanding our education and giving educational opportunities to our young people, so they can be best equipped with the tools to meet the challenges of that change. Through our excellent public institutions and innovative technology, our post-secondary system provides our young people with affordable access to education and training that leads to success. Opportunities for young people in rural and northern Saskatchewan, as well as larger cities that leads to jobs. Opportunities to learn, live, and work right here and participate fully in our economic and cultural and social life.

Mr. Speaker, that's very important because in order to have a strong economy for the future we have to equip our young people today with the tools to meet those challenges. And that's exactly what we're doing, Mr. Speaker.

Education is certainly the highway to success in the future. Education is certainly the cornerstone of any strong economy and, Mr. Speaker, I'm proud to say that Saskatchewan is leading the way in providing the best of quality of education to the students of this province.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Harper: — Mr. Speaker, we all know . . . full, fully aware that the home of medicare is right here in Saskatchewan. We all know and fully aware that health care services are under pressure right across this great country and then through North America. We all, Mr. Speaker, know that changes to the technology and changes to the service in health care were able to provide even better health care than ever before to the citizens of Saskatchewan. And you know as well as I know, Mr. Speaker, that that's exactly what Saskatchewan people deserve and that is what they are receiving.

The health care budget for the 2000-2001 is 1.978 billion, the highest ever in the history of our province, and it is 5.9 per cent higher than last year. We've experienced last year, 4,761,800 visits and consultations with family physicians and 920,700 visits and consultations with specialists. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I think that clearly indicates that we are providing top-notch health care services to the fine people of Saskatchewan.

(21:00)

I think another indicator, Mr. Speaker, and I've had some personal experience with this over this last summer, is that . . . and I know the opposition members keep saying our health care waiting lists are long and at some point in time in the past they were long, Mr. Speaker, but they have shortened dramatically in the last year, year and a half.

About a year and a half ago the MIR waiting list for elective MIR would have been twelve months. For urgent would have been three months and for emergency would have been as much as three weeks. Today, Mr. Speaker, that's not the case. Today the MIR waiting list where elective is six months, for urgent is three weeks, and for emergency is less than three days. That I can attest to personally, Mr. Speaker, because I had some experiences at that over this summer with some family members of mine.

Mr. Speaker, we provide in our health care system a lot of services that perhaps aren't noticed by the general public right off the hop. Over 800,000 days of in-hospital care services, Mr. Speaker, and an estimated 650,000 emergency room and clinic visits, Mr. Speaker. Those are the exact numbers, Mr. Speaker. And what we need to do, Mr. Speaker, is look at providing some type of assistance for prescription drugs, and I would urge the opposition members to join with the government members to pressure the federal government in bringing forward a prescription drug program to serve all the needs of all Canadians including Saskatchewan residents.

We are committed to providing accessible quality health care services that are within financial means. We also believe in a publicly funded, publicly administrated health care system. Mr. Speaker, we believe that a family's health should not depend on the family's wealth.

In order to provide these services, Mr. Speaker, we need a tax base. In order to have that tax base we must have a strong and growing economy. Mr. Speaker, I am sure it comes as no great surprise to you, no great surprise to you, Mr. Speaker, but it probably comes as a bit of a disappointment to the opposition members over there when they look at the actual factual numbers of our Saskatchewan economy. And I find it interesting, Mr. Speaker, that a story that was carried in the Toronto *Globe and Mail* on Monday, November 6, and as you know, Mr. Speaker, the Toronto *Globe and Mail* could hardly be accused of being an NDP rag. And the headline was "Saskatchewan emerges as a star of the '90s".

When we look back on the '90s which province will be remembered as the star economic performer of the decade? The winner is Saskatchewan followed by Newfoundland. Canada's economy as a whole expanded by just over 25 per cent between 1989 and 1999; Saskatchewan's economy grew by more than 32 per cent over that decade.

Mr. Speaker, that's a clear indication of the growth in this province. That growth came about because of good quality fiscal management put forward by this government, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Harper: — And I guess, Mr. Speaker, it could be said that what . . . you haven't seen anything yet. Hang around, we'll show you a lot more in the future.

And, Mr. Speaker, I also want to draw the attention of this House to an article that was in *The Leader-Post, Regina Leader-Post*, Thursday, March 22, 2001, headline: "Regina's economy looks good."

Regina will "buck the trend" by posting (a) 2.5 per cent economic growth in 2001, slightly ahead of the projected provincial growth rate of 2.3 per cent, according to the Conference Board of Canada.

Once again, Mr. Speaker — independent opinion, nothing to do with us as government except the results are shown from our good management.

"You can expect good things for this year," was quoted by the associate director of the Ottawa-based Conference Board. Expect good things this year, Mr. Speaker, and we're seeing them.

And in the last week, I've had the opportunity of bringing a couple of good news stories from Regina to this Assembly. "The number . . ." and it was also in the same article, Mr. Speaker, it says and I quote:

The number of jobs in 2001 that we've forecast (is) — 2100 — is essentially in the bank. If anything, that would be relatively (a) conservative figure, he added.

Mr. Speaker, this is the result of not only good fiscal management, this is the ability of this province to reduce its taxes over the last half a dozen years.

It also goes on to say here that:

Spurred by (the) tax cuts at the federal and provincial levels, disposable income levels will rise by 5.1 per cent this year. (This year.)

Retail sales in Regina make up one-third of the total retail sales in the province. So the retail market is to a large extent driven by activity coming from outside Regina."

Indicating, Mr. Speaker, that not only is the Regina economy strong but so is the economy of the entire province.

Another article, Mr. Speaker, on Thursday, March 22, 2001, "Sask. retail sales up." And I'll just quote from that article:

The retail (sales) jump . . . accompanied by a 5.7 per cent increase in wholesale sales (January 2001 over January 2000). Wholesale trade is made up one-third by wholesalers who supply retailers, one-third farm equipment (sales) . . . and a group of other businesses including lumber yards."

All positive signs of the strong growth in the Saskatchewan economy. And I know that's not what we've been hearing from the members opposite; we've been hearing doom and gloom from those members, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, I know that many of the forecasters are talking about the present weather conditions we're experiencing this winter here in Saskatchewan, but they're also making predictions into the summer. And I know that many of the forecasters are suggesting that with the present weather patterns that we have here today, and if that carries on into the summer months, that we could experience a drought in the western half of this province. That's what they're suggesting.

Well, Mr. Speaker, I've been doing some thinking about that and I haven't shared my thoughts yet with the Minister of Agriculture and the other ministers, but I'm beginning to think that perhaps if that is the case that we should be putting in place contingency programs or contingency mechanisms to address that event in case we do have a drought in this great province.

And I'm thinking this, Mr. Speaker, that if we took a half inch hose, a plastic line, a half inch diameter, dropped one end of it in the middle of Lake Superior and gave the other end to the opposition, Mr. Speaker, and if they can suck as well as they can blow, we can irrigate all of Saskatchewan.

Mr. Speaker, it is truly a pleasure for me to be here and to take part in this Throne Speech debate. And Mr. Speaker, I will not be voting for the amendment; I will be voting for the main motion. Thank you very much.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Elhard: — Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. It gives me great pleasure to come to this distinguished House tonight to present a reply to the Speech from the Throne on behalf of the people of Cypress Hills. And I'd like to, before I get started, acknowledge the contribution that you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and the newly elected Speaker of the House have made to this institution by allowing your names to stand for election to the various positions.

So many kind things have been said about both of you already in the last couple of days that I'm not sure there's anything more I can add. But, Mr. Deputy Speaker, it's good for democracy to have more than one person involved in an election. It takes two to have an election, and I want to commend you and the Speaker for allowing your names to stand for the respective positions for which you were selected.

I'd like to also mention just in passing that I've been in this House for less than two years and in that short period of time we have already had three Speakers. So it stands to reason that more of us will get a chance at that position over the next decade or so.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I listened intently to the Speech from the Throne a couple of days ago hoping to hear some clear delineation of this government's plan for the immediate future of this province. I was deeply disappointed. What I did hear was a recitation of well-worn platitudes and maybe even a little political rhetoric. What was missing was the pronouncement of any focused strategy to allow this province to become what it so clearly has the potential to be.

I heard a restatement of past promises that are as yet unkept. I heard credit being taken for projects and expenditures that

haven't happened as yet, and allowances made for policies that have clearly failed. I heard thundering silence on issues of tremendous importance to the future of this province, and only passing acknowledgement of several others.

This Speech from the Throne, Mr. Deputy Speaker, was long on rhetoric but short on substance. It did not set out a vision for the province or its future but borrowed heavily on the past. The speech was bereft of new ideas and short on leadership. It failed in just about every area with one possible exception and that is the twinning of the No. 1 Highway West from Tompkins to the Alberta border.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I believe it's important to give credit where credit is due, and so I want to say to the government that I welcome this initiative and appreciate its promise to deal with this problem stretch of road in a timely fashion. Even on this point though, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I would like to remind the members of this Assembly, the public at large, and the provincial media that the promise to twin the No. 1 Highway West in four years is not a new idea. It's a long overdue idea that has cost dozens of people their lives to bring to fruition — 26 people died on this stretch of road known as suicide alley from 1987 to 1998, and 350 more were injured. In the past couple of years, several more people have paid the price of lost lives, a reality which has become all too common on No. 1 West.

Just last year in April, one of the most horrific accidents ever happened along that stretch of road between the junction at 121, north of Maple Creek and the town of Piapot. The tally from that incident included three dead and five more injured. And I would like to recount the chain of events as best I can for this House as a result of an accident scene reconstruction by experts in such matters. This reconstruction was just recently released to the public, and I would like to quote from the *Maple Creek Advance Times* edition of last week, dated 19 March:

Experts have pieced together the chain of events which led to a grisly, multi-vehicle accident. The five-vehicle collision occurred on April 14, 2000, approximately 16 kilometres west of Maple Creek.

The scene for the accident was apparently set when a snowplow was clearing snow on the north shoulder of the No. 1 Highway. A gentle wind was blowing from the northeast to the southwest at the time, but it was not sufficient to quickly disperse the airborne snow particles.

The weather conditions at the time were preserved on videotape by a trucker who came upon the accident immediately after it happened. The film footage provided information which accident reconstructionists could not obtain due to the time required to reach the actual scene.

A westbound semi, with a B-train carrying 80,000 pounds, drove into the whiteout conditions and slowed down.

A westbound pickup truck, en route to a nearby residence, then entered the whiteout and collided with the rear of that B-train. The driver of the fully loaded B-train, who was slowing at the time, never felt the impact and continued west, unaware a series of deadly collisions was about to

occur.

It's believed the driver of an empty passenger bus, which was being delivered to Calgary, saw the pickup and swerved into the oncoming lane in an attempt to avoid rear-ending the half-ton truck. However, the bus caught the corner of the truck box, causing significant damage to the driver's side of the pickup.

At the same time, an eastbound semi, loaded with hogs, entered the whiteout from the west, and collided with the bus. A second eastbound semi, a Sears transport truck, then collided with the hog truck, causing the vehicles to crumple in accordion fashion before the bus was driven backwards by the force of the impact. In a matter of seconds, the bus went from travelling west to being catapulted back east.

(21:15)

A second westbound bus also en route to Calgary followed the lead bus and crossed into the oncoming lane however the force of the collision with the two semi trucks catapulted the lead bus backwards and right into the path of the oncoming bus. Both bus drivers were killed although the driver of the lead bus was ejected and found on the shoulder of the highway and he died later.

Experts believe the driver of the hog truck was killed upon impact. A fuel tank on the semi ruptured creating a fire that engulfed all the vehicles except the pickup which was pulled out of the flaming wreckage by the first motorist who came upon the scene. Damage on the front of the pickup matched the light sequence of the transport trailer which led investigators to believe another vehicle was involved, most likely a grain trailer.

Over 100 kilometres away, employees at the Dunmore weigh scale — Dunmore, Alberta — noticed something hanging from the rear of the B-train and informed the driver. The operator discovered part of a block heater cord and pieces of a pickup grill on the rear of the trailer. The driver immediately notified the RCMP (Royal Canadian Mounted Police) and later that afternoon two Transport Canada personnel and RCMP Sgt. Murray Klatt drove to Dunmore. The team also found tempered glass from the pickup on the side of the trailer.

It was at Dunmore where they first learned a snowplow had been involved. Klatt, who works in traffic collision analysis, said the snowplow was simply doing its job and visibility may have been improved if the wind had been blowing stronger and dispersed snow particles which became airborne. Klatt said seven fatalities in one year is a high number of deaths for a short section of highway stretching from the Alberta border to Tompkins. He goes on to say that the first responders in Maple Creek need a big pat on the back.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I wanted to read this into the record today because it shows clearly how horrendous that particular accident was on the stretch of road known as suicide alley. It also indicates clearly that twinning that stretch of road may have prevented that particular accident. Twinning will not

prevent all accidents; we need to make that clear. But twinning will prevent serious head-on collisions of this type and will save lives. Too many people have suffered the consequences of direct head-on collisions on that piece of road.

Mr. Speaker, or Deputy Speaker, I'm sorry, the government's promise to twin the No. 1 Highway West is a direct result of the accident that I just detailed for this House. An emergency debate that was conducted in this House last April under Rule 46. Now at that time I introduced a motion which read as follows:

That this Assembly, in light of yet another tragedy on the untwinned portion of the TransCanada Highway in Saskatchewan, urges the provincial government and federal government to immediately develop a plan to complete the twinning of No. 1 within three years, and that the transcripts of this debate this afternoon be sent to the Prime Minister, the federal Minister of Transportation, all Saskatchewan members of parliament, and all federal party leaders in the House of Commons.

The then Minister of Highways, the member from Meadow Lake, seconded the motion, but an amendment was put forward by the member from North Battleford essentially changing it to include twinning of all of the No. 1 Highway, both east and west, as well as Highway 16 over a period of not three, but four years. That motion was passed unanimously.

As you can plainly see, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the twinning idea has been around for some time, in fact enjoying the unanimous support of this House less than a year ago. As a result of the Throne Speech, we have partial fulfilment of that agreement from nearly one year ago. Albeit we still don't have the half share of funding from the federal government, but we only achieved one-third of the project in that promise. So while I'm happy to accept the government's intention with regard to the western portion, it has fallen short of its own support of last year's motion. I believe the public needs to be aware of this detail which might otherwise be lost in the euphoria of this Throne Speech promise.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, there are many good reasons for the decision by the NDP government to forge ahead with the western section of this highway over and above, of course, the tragic death and injury statistics. Some of the reasons why the government may want to proceed with the western leg of this twinning project include the ease of land assembly for the project. A lot of the land along that particular stretch of road is Crown land; and of course, the government pays very little to assemble Crown land for a Crown project. So in effect the cost of doing that portion of highway will be considerably lessened by that factor.

Another interesting contribution to their decision might be the fact that yard sites of ranches and farms along that stretch of road are set quite a distance back from the right-of-way, so again it would be less costly and much less difficult for the government to proceed with that project. Negotiations often get rigorous and difficult when you have to relocate yards. There's the relative ease of construction in that particular area, Mr. Deputy Speaker. There are no major topographical obstacles to the project and I think that that would have considerably

lessened the cost once again and certainly would allow the timetable to be kept.

And quite possibly the most important and final reason in my estimation is the psychological justifications of doing the western end of No. 1. Not only will people see the highway as safer, but the government won't have to put up with those comments about knowing when you've arrived in Saskatchewan by the worsening highway and driving conditions. The psychological factor is very important, and I believe members in the Department of Highways have agreed that that was a contributing factor to the decision to do Highway No. 1 West.

As I said earlier, Mr. Deputy Speaker, twinning the No. 1 Highway will not in itself eliminate the potential for serious accidents, but it will greatly minimize the potential for serious, life-taking, head-on mishaps. I want to quote anecdotally a member of the RCMP from the town of Gull Lake who I had a conversation with in this regard just recently.

That gentleman told me that since the highway was twinned from the town of Gull Lake west to just past the town of Tompkins, he has found the workload diminished significantly. He's not indicating that there are less accidents, but what he is saying is that the results from the accidents are much less debilitating, much less serious. And as a consequence, the heavy workload and onerousness of the workload has been transferred to the RCMP detachment in Maple Creek which still has to attend to the kinds of accidents we talked about earlier tonight.

With regard to other highway initiatives, the Throne Speech is mute except to say that spending will be at an all-time high. No specifics are mentioned. No plan is proposed. The Highways and Transportation Amendment Act which will be introduced as part of a broader, truck-route, management strategy, according to the speech, does have me concerned about the wisdom of alternate route proposals, their costs, and the impact this concept will have on all of rural Saskatchewan. I can see no good coming out of such a proposal, not in the short term and certainly not in the long run. It's a recipe for costly disaster, with RM councils and taxpayers ultimately bearing the largest portion of maintenance costs for roads that ought to have been the responsibility of the provincial government through the Department of Highways.

There is much more I'd like to add about the highway discussion arising from the Throne Speech, but due to time constraints I want to move on to some other very important areas that need to be mentioned on behalf of the people of Cypress Hills.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, agriculture, so often said to be the number one industry in Saskatchewan, had so little said about it in the Throne Speech. The government's initiatives in this area are woefully inadequate. I don't know if you're aware of it, Mr. Deputy Speaker, but the word agriculture is used one time, only once in the entire Throne Speech. I think that's quite alarming considering the impact that agriculture has and the role it plays in the provincial economy. The fact that it was only mentioned once was brought to my attention, coincidentally, by some individuals who visited this particular Chamber to hear the

Throne Speech from the community of Leader.

There was a school group of grade 8's that were brought here. They participated in the event, they watched the procedures from the galleries and were quite entranced by the pomp and ceremony and circumstance of that particular event. But after the formalities were over, when I had a chance to visit with the students and their tutors and drivers and teachers, one of the first things that they said to me was: where is agriculture in this Throne Speech? We didn't hear it.

Now these are young people and these are adults whose lives depend on agriculture and to have the government completely disregard the significance of that industry in a Speech from the Throne in view of the difficulties facing that industry at this time is just incomprehensible. I can't believe a government in good conscience could be that deleterious in their responsibility. I think this is an indication that the government of the day, Mr. Deputy Speaker, talks a lot about agriculture but does very little, and in fact they didn't even talk about it in the Throne Speech.

One of the issues that is brought to my attention frequently through my constituency office is the failures of the AIDA program. If I could count the number of calls that have come to my office on that one issue alone, I think I would be in the several dozen area. AIDA has been a colossal failure. You, Mr. Deputy Speaker, have heard that before I'm sure in this House, and I'm sure members opposite must be aware of it from all the times we've raised it, not that many of them would have had calls on the issue, but nevertheless it is a significant issue in my constituency.

There is tremendous frustration among the farming populous of this province with the program commonly known as AIDA. Not only does it not work adequately here but the individual farmers who have made time available to apply, who have paid the cost of an application, who have forked out considerable dollars to their accountants to make sure the applications were done properly in accordance with the rules and regulations, have been absolutely appalled by the level of knowledge exhibited by people in the AIDA office. So many of those farmers who have made application have been harassed, frankly, by individuals working in the AIDA office, calling them for additional information. It is frustrating beyond belief to be called many, many times on the same issue with the most absurd kinds of questions that anybody with just a rudimentary knowledge of agriculture would already know.

I would like to ask — not that this government is able to do much about it except exercise some influence — I would like to ask what kind of people are hired, what knowledge requirements are expected of the people who work in the AIDA office? What do they have to know about agriculture to qualify for a job there?

It's evident from the calls I'm getting that the individuals working in the AIDA office don't know much about the subject, frankly. And some of the questions get to the point of being bizarre, if not uninformed.

One of the other things that has been brought to my attention as it concerns AIDA, Mr. Deputy Speaker, is the blatant

unreliability of the program and the disparity of the program.

I'd like to tell you just briefly the story of a gentleman in my constituency who I've asked his permission to name in this speech tonight — Mr. Alan Dumontel. Farms in the area of Claydon, which is in the extreme southwest of my constituency. He is a very frustrated and unhappy man today as it concerns AIDA.

Here is a man who's spent considerable sums of money having his accountants fill out the forms. Here is a man who believed once the documents were filled out that he would be receiving some financial support from the program. Here is a man who was in need of the kind of support that would be forthcoming based on his accountant's best estimates.

This is a man who got a cheque from the AIDA office in the first year of his application for \$17,000. He spent the money quickly; paying bills that had accumulated from his operation over the previous season.

The second year he applied once again and was told he would qualify for funding. True to form, AIDA sent him a cheque for \$11,000.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, only days following receipt of the second cheque, Mr. Dumontel got a call from the AIDA office saying that they had miscalculated his apportionment, and a letter demanding full repayment of the \$28,000, plus — adding insult to injury — interest due immediately.

(21:30)

Mr. Deputy Speaker, a program that works like that is not only unfair to farmers, it is tantamount to psychological abuse. I can't think of any other way to describe it. A program that would do that to individuals, set them up and allow them to fall, is just unbelievable. And I don't believe that we as a provincial government, as people concerned about individuals in the agricultural industry, should stand for that kind of a situation. And I would urge the government to address the issue as best they can so that these kinds of things don't happen again.

Now we hear talk about the CFIP (Canadian Farm Income Program) which in pejorative terms is known as the son of AIDA or any other close relative. And we feel that particular program is a potential minefield. I feel that very definitely from my constituents. I know there are some who think any help is worth trying to get and is better than nothing at all, but if this program works no better than AIDA did, I can't in good conscience support it, and I'm just wondering where the government stands on this.

We see clearly the necessity for changes to the program before we can support it. We don't want Saskatchewan's involvement in CFIP without some changes to it. But we hope also that the minister does not back us into a corner on this one by making our involvement provincially an either/or proposition.

As I mentioned earlier, agriculture got short shrift in the Throne Speech. And while I find that disturbing, I think that we need to make it plainly and keenly clear to this government that there are other issues beginning to develop in the agricultural industry

that are going to have to be addressed at some point. I'm thinking most specifically, as was referred to by the member from the side opposite, about the potential for drought in western Saskatchewan.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the potential for drought is not the right word. Unless we get major, major wet snowfall or early spring rains, we will be in the midst of a serious drought. Mr. Deputy Speaker, right now there is a dearth of moisture in the Cypress Hills constituency. We have ranchers who have experienced completely dry dugouts for this past winter going back to last summer.

We have dams that have not had any water run into them for a couple of years now. We have ranchers who are actually buying water from commercial outlets. Some even have bought water from the city of Medicine Hat and have had it trucked to their ranches in order for their cattle to have the water necessary for survival this past winter. We are in the midst of what could become a very critical drought-related problem in the southwest.

Right now the problem is most acute in the immediate area of Maple Creek, in the region of Golden Prairie, north of Maple Creek, and in the far south around Consul and Govenlock. And right now there are several RMs already declared as drought-affected and several more which are applying to the federal government for drought-affected status.

This leads me, Mr. Deputy Speaker, to the cover conservation program that was announced with little fanfare in the Throne Speech. I would like to say tonight that this program is what I would call a small step, a small incremental step in the right direction. But larger acreages, Mr. Deputy Speaker, are seriously required to accomplish the benefits foreseen for the cattle industry. The question I would like to ask the Minister of Agriculture, Minister of Agriculture through your Chair, is how many years will it take for this program to provide any significant benefit to the expanded cowherd in Saskatchewan. A minimum of 5 acres, a maximum of 50 acres, a four-year program — as you can see, we're not going to get much land into cover crop situations given those kind of limitations. Fifty acres is simply not enough to turn some of the needs of ranchers into reality into terms of an expanded cowherd. It isn't enough.

In fact, I had, I would say, eight . . . seven or eight ranchers and farmers waiting for clear indications of what this program would entail. They've been asking me about this program since it was announced in last spring's session. I remember the deputy premier at that time indicated that we would have a cover program and ever since that time, people have just been waiting anxiously to hear what the provisions of that program might be. My office, when we got the details, phoned every one of those constituents and gave them a clear breakdown on what the expected remunerations might be and what the total acreages might be.

An Hon. Member: — What did they say, Wayne?

Mr. Elhard: — It's impolite for me to say at this time what their response was, Mr. Deputy Speaker. It would be unparliamentary as a minimum, and maybe just hilarious on the other hand. However, having said that, maybe the best response

I got from one individual was, "Fifty acres? Are you kidding? That's not enough for me to turn my machinery around." Now we have big ranches and big farms in the southwest. Fifty acres is not much land.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I'd like to turn now to the issue of rural revitalization. This is one of the most critical areas facing the provincial government, I believe, and in view of the importance of rural revitalization and the initiatives that could be undertaken by such a department, I find it disappointing that it's been instituted as a mere secretariat. The significance of this particular issue really required a full-fledged ministry. Furthermore it required a full-fledged minister.

Mr. Speaker, I'm glad to see you're back on the throne and I'm sure that you'll enjoy the rest of my speech as much as the Deputy Speaker enjoyed the first part.

An Hon. Member: — Start over.

Mr. Elhard: — As a matter of fact I understand that some of the members opposite enjoyed the speech so much they are encouraging me to start over, which I'd be happy to do.

Mr. Speaker, this is an important issue and I don't want to minimize the importance of it with levity right now.

Mr. Speaker, I must admit that the appointment of the current Minister of Rural Revitalization has a certain bitter irony about it for the people of Cypress Hills, indeed all of rural Saskatchewan. This minister has a track record, Mr. Speaker. This minister has a history that spoke volumes about her commitment to the well-being of rural Saskatchewan.

This minister has been the undoing of much of the vitality of rural Saskatchewan as a former Health minister. She was the one who presided over the closure of many rural hospital beds, who cut services in community after community, who underfunded the health districts, and who commissioned the EMS (emergency medical services) report which has raised further fears about ambulance availability in small-town Saskatchewan.

Mr. Speaker, this Minister of Highways and Rural Revitalization has a record in the country and it's not a good one. The massive groan, which was raised from the reaches beyond Ring Road when word of her appointment was heard, was not one of anticipation, but one of disdain. The people of rural Saskatchewan know that if she does for rural revitalization what she did for health care, there won't be a vital sign left in rural Saskatchewan.

Proof of my assertion, Mr. Speaker, was heard this afternoon in question period when we asked her to reconsider her department's plans for alternate truck routes in the region around Vanguard while letting the highway suffer from continued neglect. What was her response, Mr. Speaker? Not a willingness to look at the situation for possibly better solutions, not an admission that things could be done differently or with more efficiency. She indicated that the department was going to go ahead with this absurd plan without any regard to the negative impact it will have on the residents and businesses in that area. The businesses don't count when it comes to

decisions by this minister on behalf of the NDP government. And rural revitalization is just another pretty word for lip service to the problems facing rural Saskatchewan.

Mr. Speaker, I was appalled with the minister's first response to the issues of rural Saskatchewan when I heard her interviewed following her swearing-in as Minister of Highways and Rural Revitalization. I heard her say, clearly, that cell service was the first thing that came to her mind when she was asked about rural revitalization.

Of all the desperate needs crying for the attention of this government, cell service is not the first priority in rural Saskatchewan, nor is high-speed Internet. Both of those features might be nice, Mr. Speaker, but what is this government doing for the real problems that exist right now? What really are the priorities of this government?

Rural revitalization requires dependable infrastructure, especially highways and working railways. Rural revitalization requires policies that encourage people to stay in smaller communities and further encourages people to relocate there. Rural revitalization demands that policies be put in place to make it easier to do business, not more difficult. And, Mr. Speaker, services need to be maintained in smaller communities, not steadily eroded or eliminated.

Crown corporations need to encourage expansion opportunities with realistic costs for services. This particular issue has been alluded to by several of my colleagues. The member from Humboldt addressed it directly in her response to the Speech from the Throne. I have had several constituents appeal to my office for my intervention because of the outrageous costs associated with expansion projects that they had proposed for rural Saskatchewan.

In one instance, I can think of a rancher who was looking to add another yard site to his operation, from which he would feed cattle. An expanded cattle industry is something that's important to this province. It's even part of your own government's plans for agriculture expansion and diversification. I know that as a matter of fact. But when this gentleman wanted to put in a second site for feeding cattle, when he approached SaskPower to see what it would cost him to bring electricity to that particular site, he was quoted somewhere in the range of \$20,000.

Now, Mr. Speaker, you can understand that \$20,000 is a prohibitive amount of money, and it's unacceptable for this government to talk about rural revitalization as though they own the subject on one hand while on the other hand the agencies of this government are quoting outrageous amounts of money for installations of SaskPower.

I want to give you another example, Mr. Speaker, another rancher just south of my community — and I find this very disturbing — another rancher just south of my community phoned SaskPower and asked about a similar installation. This individual had to run a power line less than two miles, but it would again allow for a significant increase in his operational capabilities which would be good for that individual and for Saskatchewan generally. When he asked the representative from SaskPower for a cost estimate, the individual on the other end

of the line said, \$40,000. When the constituent came to my office and quoted me that number and told me about his call and the response he had gotten I said to him, that's an outrageous figure, go back to SaskPower and demand a quote in writing.

Mr. Speaker, as a result of having suggested that to him the constituent did just that and got a quote in writing for exactly half of the amount. The written quote was \$20,000; the verbal quote had been 40. If my constituent had not gone back and asked for written confirmation he'd have believed to this day that it cost \$40,000 to run a power line less than two miles in rural Saskatchewan. There cannot be appropriate or extensive rural revitalization when the Crowns are making those kinds of estimates and sometimes just pulling numbers out of the air. That is a very negative and debilitating response to the real needs of people in rural Saskatchewan.

Mr. Speaker, the high cost of natural gas and electricity has another important and undermining affect in rural Saskatchewan today. Social costs to a community are about to get higher with the latest rounds of utility cost increases. Increases to SaskPower rates and natural gas costs are going to force several community arenas to close or severely curtail their activities.

(21:45)

As you know, Mr. Speaker, most of those arenas in small town Saskatchewan run on the basis of volunteer labour and local fund raising efforts to just keep their doors open. They're not money-making projects. They just barely scrape by. But utility costs have doubled over the past several months for most of those arenas putting them at unsustainable levels.

These not-for-profit facilities are the social centres of many small towns in the winter and they get by on just a shoestring. And today as a result of the horrific increases in the power and natural gas costs, the recreation centres in Eastend, in Frontier, in the town of Cabri, in the town of Leader, are all under severe financial pressure. And others are just as likely to be hurt by this turn of events. A brand new complex in the town of Maple Creek may be put in jeopardy because of unexpectedly high-operational costs even before it is built. Mr. Speaker, if rural revitalization really is an important element in this government's agenda, let it take the initiative to address the impossible situation these arenas and other not-for-profit facilities face each and every day.

There are other areas too that could be addressed, Mr. Speaker, but will no doubt escape the attention of the less than friendly anti-business minds of the government members opposite. We have reassessment activities which are making rural hotels unsustainable business ventures in the communities of Leader, Maple Creek, and Cabri.

Mr. Speaker, using as an yet undecipherable formula, the Saskatchewan Assessment Management Authority has arbitrarily increased assessments on property owners in the communities aforementioned, making their take burden impossibly high. Room rents will have to go up to the hundreds of dollars per night of use to even allow recovery of the increased tax bill. Now I ask you the question, Mr. Speaker,

what kind of effect will that have on business in rural Saskatchewan? Who on the government side will take responsibility for the revitalization of those businesses?

In a similar vain, Mr. Speaker, the new owner of the motel in the community of Leader wrote to the Saskatchewan Federation of Independent Business seeking their assistance to resolve a tax matter which came quite unexpectedly with his recent purchase of the property. And I would like to quote for the record, Mr. Speaker, some of the concerns outlined in this particular example by the CFIB (Canadian Federation of Independent Business) to our finance critic, the member from Canora-Pelly. And I quote, Mr. Speaker:

In your capacity as finance critic, I thought it important for you to be aware of our members' concerns. (This letter as I mentioned was written by the CFIB to . . . I'm sorry to our Finance critic from Canora-Pelly). I am therefore enclosing for your information and interest a copy of correspondence I received from our member who owns a motel in Leader and which outlines the concerns regarding Saskatchewan's fees and licences.

This gentleman recently moved from Spruce Grove, Alberta, and purchased a motel in Leader. Mr. Speaker, that ought to be good news. That ought to be good news. I haven't heard anybody cheering from the side opposite.

In his correspondence however he notes the difference of fees in Alberta and Saskatchewan as it relates to land titles registration and mortgage fees. He paid \$1,116 in registration of transfer of land and \$836 in registration of mortgage at the Land Titles Office in Saskatchewan. As well on top of the fees, this gentleman received a letter from Saskatchewan Finance requesting him to fill out a business assets declaration form to charge him PST on used goods including business assets. In a letter to us, this gentleman states, and I quote again, "If I had known this, I would not have closed this sale. This motel would still be for sale, and it would most definitely not have been purchased by a person from Alberta. What has happened to this province? It is obviously not open for business," and then in bold print the word "Help."

Mr. Speaker, that last line or that last word help speaks volumes, I think, about what business people in this province are feeling. And I would like to just conclude this particular example in preparation for moving adjournment tonight. This individual in a separate letter indicates that he sold a business worth \$312,000 before coming to Saskatchewan and paid a grand total of \$400 in fees. Now you compare that to nearly \$2000 in fees for a sale significantly lesser in value in this province.

Once again, rural revitalization is in peril because of the inequities between Saskatchewan and other jurisdictions in simple business transactions. I think the owner's plaintive cry of help is really the telling item here. Businessmen and women throughout Saskatchewan — whether they be in a store, on a farm, or anywhere in between — are crying help. Rural revitalization is higher on their agenda than it is on the agenda of this government, Mr. Speaker, but no one is listening. There's just more lip service being paid to the matter.

Mr. Speaker, I'm only part way through my speech tonight, but it's getting late, and I know that the white flag is being waved across the way. So I would move that we adjourn the debate for tonight.

Debate adjourned.

The Assembly adjourned at 21:51.