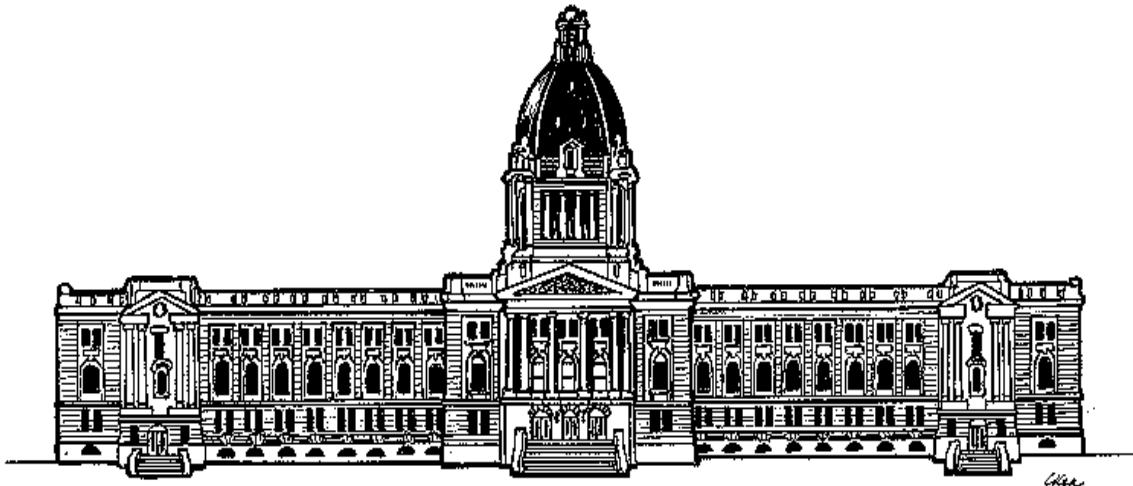




STANDING COMMITTEE ON INTERGOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS AND INFRASTRUCTURE

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**STANDING COMMITTEE ON INTERGOVERNMENTAL
AFFAIRS AND INFRASTRUCTURE
2004**

Mr. Ron Harper, Chair
Regina Northeast

Mr. Bob Bjornerud, Deputy Chair
Melville-Saltcoats

Mr. Denis Allchurch
Rosthern-Shellbrook

Ms. June Draude
Kelvington-Wadena

Ms. Sandra Morin
Regina Walsh Acres

Mr. Kim Trew
Regina Coronation Park

Hon. Mark Wartman
Regina Qu'Appelle Valley

The committee met at 15:00.

**General Revenue Fund
Government Relations and Aboriginal Affairs
Vote 30**

Subvote (GR01)

The Chair: — I'd like to call to order the Standing Committee on Intergovernmental Affairs and Infrastructure.

Today we'll be dealing with the estimates of the Department of Aboriginal Affairs, vote 30 in the Estimates book. We having chitting in for Mr. Wartman, Mr. Buckley Belanger.

I will invite the minister to introduce his officials.

Hon. Mr. Sonntag: — Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. First of all, seated immediately to my right is Brent Cotter, the deputy minister of Government Relations and Aboriginal Affairs. To my immediate left is the assistant deputy minister of Aboriginal Affairs, Donavon Young. To Brent's right is Wanda Lamberti, executive director of finance and management services. And I believe seated directly behind me — yes — is Curt Talbot, the executive director, First Nations lands and resources, Aboriginal Affairs.

The Chair: — Thank you, Mr. Minister. I will entertain an opening statement from you now.

Hon. Mr. Sonntag: — Thank you very much. First of all, just before I start, may I say for probably many who are aware of this, I want to just have it on the record and thank our deputy, Brent Cotter, who will be leaving us before very long to take up a new career. I expect most people know that but I want to, on the record, thank him very much for his contribution to the department and to our province. And I know he will be missed tremendously, as a number of other senior civil servants will be in the last, while we've made these announcements. So thank you very much, Brent.

So I'll just have, as I say, just a very brief opening statement. As Minister of Aboriginal Affairs, we have essentially three priorities — first of all providing socio-economic and employment development opportunities for Aboriginal people, making Saskatchewan ready for Aboriginal youth, and building bridges of respect between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities. These priorities are interrelated and integral to the province now and, of course, into the future.

From these priorities derive our government's goal for Aboriginal Affairs and how we are working to achieve this goal. Our goal is that the aspirations of Saskatchewan's Aboriginal people are understood and realized within the broader Saskatchewan community. We are achieving this goal through relationships between and among Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples and communities alike.

Many successful business partnerships exist between governments, Aboriginal, and non-Aboriginal organizations. The First Nations Gaming Agreement, the Clarence Campeau Development Fund, the Meadow Lake OSB (oriented strand

board) partnership, and the expansion of forests of Saskatchewan's forestry sector are just a few of these examples.

There are, of course, many other successful Aboriginal business ventures all across this province, both on- and off-reserve. Our government is committed to providing ongoing socio-economic and employment development opportunities for Aboriginal people. The Aboriginal Employment Development Program is a concrete example of this commitment. Based on partnerships, the Aboriginal Employment Development Program works with its partners to remove workplace barriers and then to share information with the Aboriginal people about skills training and job opportunities.

Despite a difficult budget year, we increased funding to the Aboriginal Employment Development Program by \$200,000. And as of May 7, 2004 we have now signed 54 partnership agreements across the province with large public and private sector employers, organized labour, government departments, Aboriginal organizations, post-secondary institutions, and community-based organizations.

Our efforts, Mr. Chair, through the Aboriginal Employment Development Program are seeing a significant success. Through partnerships we have been able to employ more than 1,700 Aboriginal people; 900 Aboriginal people have completed training directly linked to employment with our partners; and more than 7,000 employees have received cultural awareness education that will assist in preparing the workplace.

Our second priority is preparing Saskatchewan for Aboriginal youth. This priority . . . complements, I should say, the government's central vision to prepare the way for the next generation. Young Aboriginal people are one of the province's greatest resources and statistics show that Aboriginal youth is the fastest growing segment of our population. We face a challenge to ensure that these young people are part of our economy and part of our society. We need to make this challenge into an opportunity.

Young Aboriginal people are the central focus of our government's nationally recognized Framework for Cooperation— a strategy for Métis and off-reserve First Nations people. This strategy coordinates government services for Aboriginal people and is a co-operative effort between Aboriginal people, communities, and 12 provincial government departments.

Examples of very successful community-based programs that support youth include pre-kindergarten, nutrition and outreach programs, as well as Kids First and School^{PLUS} to name just a few.

The last priority I would want to speak about is building bridges of respect between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities. We have recognized the important historical, cultural, and economic contributions of Aboriginal people to this province and of course to Canada. Our government recognizes the need for public education to correct misconceptions and create better cultural awareness between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities. This is why we have incorporated both First Nations and Métis content and

perspective into the provincial core curriculum.

This is also why we are continuing to meet our treaty land entitlement obligations. Our government works closely with the Treaty Commissioner in the area of public education, and I want to commend Judge David Arnot in the Office of the Treaty Commissioner, for raising public awareness and promoting education about the treaties in the school system.

Much has been accomplished in building bridges of respect between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities but there's still much, much more that needs to be done.

In closing, our government believes that Saskatchewan has a very bright future because our future is tied to the future of Aboriginal peoples. We are therefore dedicated to finding success in integrating Aboriginal people into the province's social, economic, and employment structures; but at the same time doing this in a way that promotes cultural understanding. When we have achieved this goal we will have truly achieved prosperity for all people in Saskatchewan.

Thank you very much for the opportunity to make that brief opening statement.

The Chair: — Thank you, Mr. Minister. Ms. Draude.

Ms. Draude: — Thank you very much. And Minister, thank you, and to the officials. Mr. Cotter, I know that you're going to be missed in the province. I know that you've been working with different departments for a number of years and you have a lot of expertise, so I'm sure wherever you go next in your life you will be very successful. And I hope you're very happy. There's lots of opportunities outside of government and I'm sure you probably can remember that. Some of us do. But I know that it's very valuable when you spend time in the legislature and a lot of people have benefited from the work you've done.

Mr. Minister, I appreciate your opening statement, and just for the record I'd like you to know that I think everybody in Saskatchewan knows the importance of our Aboriginal people when it comes to building our province. We don't have a future without the involvement and the partnership of all Aboriginal people. And it's disappointing when we look at some of the media reports that talk about . . . that basically seem like we're pitting one group of people against another. And I find it really disappointing when things like a recent poll in the Saskatoon *StarPhoenix* show that 67 per cent of people believe that we shouldn't be involved in the treaties.

They don't understand it. A treaty agreement is a contract between two groups of people. It's not just Aboriginal or First Nations people that are involved in the treaties. We all are. We all benefit from them. And it is something that I think that . . . it is a message that has to be sent.

The Office of the Treaty Commissioner is an excellent example of how we are . . . how Saskatchewan is working to include all First Nations people. And I know that the report that was done last year actually gave his office recommendations that were sent to the . . . recognized by the United Nations with the work that he's done, and I'd like to congratulate him and his office on

the work that's being done.

I know that it could be considered a challenge, some of the work that must be done in the next short while. The Aboriginal population is growing quickly. I believe that by 2015, 42 per cent of the young people going into kindergarten are going to be Aboriginal. And we must address the issues that are involved around making sure everyone is part of growing our economy.

But I have some questions and I think I must start with the one that is the most recent, and that was the election yesterday, the Métis election. It was after the 2001 election where there was a number of irregularities and people who were concerned about the way the election was held, there was 35 recommendations that were brought forward, and I believe that there was very few of them were actually implemented.

I'd like to start by congratulating Robert Doucette, who was elected last night. I know that he hasn't been officially announced, at least not in the last I heard it hadn't been officially announced that he was the president. And I'm hoping that happens quickly because I believe that will send a message that this election did have some changes in it.

But some of the irregularities that have come forward to my office, and I'm sure to yours, are ones that have to be addressed. Maybe we could start by telling me, if you could advise me what you've heard about the election results, if there are some that are actually considered finished or final at this time.

Hon. Mr. Sonntag: — Thank you very much, and let me just again acknowledge the very good points that you've made with respect to the Office of the Treaty Commissioner and the work that Judge David Arnot has been doing across the province with a fairly small contingent of staff. It seems many of the different events that I have gone to I run into Judge Arnot, and nothing but good words follow where he goes, so he's doing a wonderful job.

And I also want to . . . I made reference in my opening remarks about the Aboriginal Employment Development Program, but that as well, which is housed in our department in Aboriginal Affairs, does much of the same sort of work and they really complement each other. And I know you've acknowledged and recognized that and I, as the minister responsible, certainly want to . . . I certainly appreciate that.

With respect to the Poitras report that you specifically refer to, in fact the majority — and I emphasize the majority — of the recommendations in that report were actually implemented and put in place. And there have been, there have been significant changes. I think with the exception of two of the recommendations, albeit significant recommendations, everything else has been implemented. And we actually have been involved with discussions with the MNS (Métis Nation of Saskatchewan) to see how we could implement those last two recommendations.

Because you will logically ask the question about which two, let me just talk about those two right away. The two recommendations that we have concern about yet in the report are the following. First, with respect to a voters list; we are not satisfied that the voters list is in the format that we would want

and that a voters list is yet provided to the membership the way it should be provided.

Secondly, it is with respect to the senate committee, in the committee of the senate, that essentially is the overseers of the election process itself. We think that while they may operate independently, the perception is clearly that they do not operate independently and I think that is a concern. I've articulated those concerns in a letter to the MNS. So far I think we've agreed to disagree, but these are two important points that we will want to continue to pursue.

With respect to the election itself, Ms. Draude, you and I have had a number of conversations, as I know you have with the department as well. But I think it's a little early yet. We have received, I think it's fair to say, a significant number of calls to our office. Nothing yet has really been substantiated. I think there are some concerns around ballot boxes and things like that. But we will want to ensure that in fact ballot boxes are missing before we would comment on that.

And there are certainly appeal processes available within the MNS as well if there is any inappropriateness at all. But I think it's fair to say that there is not any absolute evidence of anything that has been done, that there has been any wrongdoing yet through the election at all.

Ms. Draude: — Thank you, Mr. Minister. I'm aware that the talk about the ballot boxes and also the number of people that were turned away at the polls yesterday, the numbers are quite staggering if I can believe everybody that's called and my own personal experience, because I did go there yesterday and had an opportunity to speak to some of the people that hadn't had the opportunity to vote.

People like elders, 65 years old, that had been on the voters list for a number of years were turned away and people who felt that they had been . . . applied for their Métis card for three and four years and haven't received them yet. It's the time frame that it's taken to receive those cards made it impossible for them to vote.

And I believe that those concerns were ones that we had talked about and I think you addressed them in a letter that you sent to me on April 1 where you talked about the province between, in the past two fiscal years, Canada and Saskatchewan have both provided \$100,000 to the MNS to implement electoral reforms. By putting this money in, I guess it means that we are . . . have some responsibility to ensure that this election process was actually not with some irregularities of the last one.

So the voters list, the cards, are ones that I'm wondering if you are continuing to hear that this is a problem. Do you have any plans for what would happen if you feel that there's a large percentage of people were not heard?

Hon. Mr. Sonntag: — Let me just make a couple of points. First of all, it would be our belief right now that there has been a significant . . . let me say, qualify that by saying an improvement at least over the 2001 elections. It is our belief that there were more people who had the opportunity to vote in this past election, the election of yesterday I should say, than were afforded the opportunity to vote in 2001. That's been

evidenced I think even in my own community. And I'm hearing across the province that that's been the case.

With respect to the registry and the financial contribution that the province and the federal government made, that work is ongoing. I think it is also fair to say that we would have hoped that work would have been completed for this particular election yesterday. That was not the case. But having said that, I am still confident that there is significant progress being made on that file and we look forward to that work being completed in the I hope not too distant future.

Ms. Draude: — The discussions that we've had over the last two or three months revolved a lot around the membership cards themselves. And I'm wondering, can you tell me what kind of pressure you put on the MNS to ensure that more people had cards? It seemed to be one of the big issues that I was hearing about a lot.

Hon. Mr. Sonntag: — This is, I mean, it's an important question but it's also a difficult issue to deal with from this perspective. Our government has been of the view — and I think probably from my discussions with you largely, you've been . . . you've shared our view on this — is that the MNS, the Métis people of Saskatchewan, deserve the rights to run their own elections.

They're no different than, as far as I'm concerned as it pertains to election process, than municipal governments, urban or rural. They should be able to govern themselves in that regard. And with the introduction of The Métis Act in many ways it was, while maybe not directly referred to in the words in the Act, but certainly provided more autonomy for the Métis Nation of Saskatchewan.

Having said that, I think it is important that there is transparency and accountability within the Métis Nation. And I would be hopeful, as minister, that that certainly sees improvement from where it was some years ago. I think that is happening. I'm not sure that we're sort of in a perfect world yet, as maybe many governments aren't in a perfect world. But I am reluctant to interfere until we sort of know there are significant problems. And at the same time, as I said, it's important that the . . . through the . . . particularly with the proclamation of The Métis Act that the MNS be afforded an opportunity to govern themselves the same as any other local governments are allowed to govern themselves.

Ms. Draude: — Mr. Sonntag, can you tell me who's mandated with responsibility to ensure that there is a registry?

Mr. Cotter: — Thank you, Ms. Draude. I think the objective here with respect to the registry is to try to provide the maximum regulatory . . . or regularity with respect to the identification of Métis people registered as Métis, and that can then form the basis of a voters list.

There is no particular entity that is kind of the governmental overseer of this project. What happened was that the province and the federal government agreed to have devoted some of the financial support they provide to the Métis Nation of Saskatchewan specifically dedicated to this project.

And there is oversight of the project to ensure that the money is invested in worthwhile and successful ways to produce that registry. That work is not complete yet. It's a complicated process when there are a significant number of Métis people out there. There is a team — and Donovan you might elaborate a little bit more on this — that on the part of the province and on the federal government that oversees that exercise to ensure that the provincial and federal investments in the project are going to serve a suitable end purpose. We haven't gotten to the end of that purpose yet.

Ms. Draude: — If I understand you correctly, then you are saying that this team, the ones that are going to be doing the overseeing, is actually a combination of federal and provincial representatives.

Mr. Cotter: — That's correct, in the sense that we are involved in ensuring that the federal and the provincial money is spent in an intelligent way to produce this registry. But it is not an investment in an entity that either the federal or the provincial government own or directly control, in the sense that we haven't created them. They are created by an independent piece of legislation and before that were a non-profit corporation.

So what we have tried to do is establish a relationship with the entity that assists them in being as disciplined and responsible and electorally and democratically responsible to Métis people as possible. And that's the basis upon which we have directed provincial and the federal government has directed federal money to establish this registry to produce a kind of electoral discipline around who are Métis people and who are entitled to vote.

Ms. Draude: — Thank you. Can you tell me, have you set a time frame in order to have this registry in place? It's just not a good use of money if we say something is going to be done but we don't give them some kind of a time to tell them that this has to be done in. So can you advise me of that time frame?

Mr. Cotter: — I think based on the progress that's been made so far, we are estimating that we would have that in place in the next year or two. But I couldn't give you a specific date for that to be concluded. Maybe I could just add by saying that we would be significantly disappointed if that registry work was not concluded and able to be a significant base for the next Métis election.

Ms. Draude: — The minister had indicated that he was not comfortable or willing to say that there's going to be a . . . and that there's a problem at this time. He'd have to have some evidence before he'd want to get involved. And the problem with the type of situation we have right now is there's no opposition or recognized opposition, or if people do have concerns it's usually on an individual basis, and there's no way to come forward as a group and say there's a problem.

So basically we rely on the people who are elected to say if there is a problem or not. And that really isn't any way to operate, because of course it's like anything else. You say when I come to me, if I say there's a problem, somebody says is it a problem? I say no there's not, then you walk away and say well, I guess there isn't a problem.

My concern is that right now we are going to go to those who are elected and they are going to say no everything is fine, and your office and my office is going to continue to get the calls from people who say, you know it's not fine. There's irregularities and we don't know where to go to.

So is your office setting up some sort of system so that we would know if there really is a concern that should be addressed and not just ignoring people whose voice and franchise didn't have an opportunity?

Mr. Cotter: — I think that you make some excellent points. There are no sort of defined political parties inside the Métis Nation Saskatchewan so that it is not so much some kind of a group opposition in some articulated and organized way for people who are either disappointed in the election outcome or feel that it has not been conducted properly.

In 2001 when a number of voices were raised about the irregularities around the Métis election, and a number of those voices I think had some legitimate complaints, the Métis Nation Saskatchewan — as I think Donovan might describe about its own processes and entertaining those criticisms and in some cases appeals — the Métis Nation Saskatchewan was open to an exercise that brought in somebody independently to make a set of recommendations to produce a better electoral discipline around their own electoral decision-making. And that was really what led to the investment that the federal and the provincial government made in supporting the work of Marilyn Poitras who wrote the report to which you and the minister earlier referred.

It is in the nature of the Métis Nation Saskatchewan that complaints and criticisms tend to come forward from individuals because it tends to have been individuals who were somewhat aggrieved, whether they didn't get to vote, or something happened to a ballot box in which a vote of theirs might have appeared, or they thought they were on the voters list and found they weren't.

In a sense for us, in making an assessment of the kind of quality and legitimacy of the election, it is a collection of those individual concerns, and the number of those concerns that have validity to them. And so we are not asking the Métis Nation to construct an organized opposition to communicate its concern about the election. We are trying — and I think as the minister identified, and I'm sure you have experienced as well — trying to assess the collective legitimacy of a series of individual complaints all added together to determine how troubled people should be, and how troubled we might be in relating to a Métis Nation that has conducted a less than perfect election. Maybe I could ask Donovan Young to observe on a few of the processes that actually do get used by the Métis Nation of Saskatchewan.

Mr. Young: — Especially for candidates, there is a fairly lengthy appeal process and I think we'd be the first to admit that it is not a perfect process. But it does begin with an appeal to a senate committee. And that happens within a couple of weeks of the election. And that's followed by a Métis Nation legislative assembly. Appeals are taken to that assembly. And then finally the annual general meeting of the Métis Nation would confirm the election results, or overturn election results for a particular candidate.

So there are those three points: the senate, the Métis Nation legislative assembly, and then the annual general meeting. In addition, of course, the Chief Electoral Officer himself, in about a month I'm told, will issue a fairly comprehensive report describing the election — problems, difficulties, issues, and so on. So there is an appeal process. It's lengthy, not perfect, but it has worked in the past with spotted success.

The Chair: — Ms. Bakken.

Ms. Bakken: — Thank you, Mr. Deputy Chair. I'd just like to ask a few questions and make a few comments. I also have had numerous calls about the concerns about yesterday's election, and I hear your answers. I'm very concerned that there has been really little new information given, and when Ms. Draude asked about the process and how people are registered, I don't believe that there was a clear answer given. And I would just first of all like to ask Minister Sonntag, you indicated that you felt that there were more people that voted this time than last time. Do you have a number of how many people actually did vote?

Hon. Mr. Sonntag: — No, we don't. I think we'll have a sense of that before very long. Let me try this, as you were asking other questions. Here's I think a good summary of where I would be at on this issue of as a minister where I would get involved. Until sort of the appeal processes are completed, and if after that time as the minister responsible I would be convinced that those elected officials within the MNS do not represent the wishes of the majority of the Métis people of Saskatchewan, I think I would want to give consideration to what the department and myself as minister would do.

But it's way too early now, although there have been — as I acknowledge because there have been calls to my office — there have been concerns raised, but until I know that the, as I said, the elected people don't represent the wishes of the Métis people of Saskatchewan, I would not involve myself in the process yet.

Ms. Bakken: — Thank you, Mr. Minister. Then I assume from your comments that if it is warranted that you will take necessary steps to ensure that this was actually a fair election. And I guess, because it is after the fact, one of the major concerns that we were made aware of is that people that were not on the registry or not on the voters list did not have the opportunity to take a declaration to say, I am Métis, I do say that I am eligible to vote. The same responsibility that is given to everyone in Saskatchewan in a general election, that if they're not on the voters list they have the opportunity to put the onus on themselves and say, I am eligible to vote.

And I would like to ask why was this denied of people at the Métis election when it is a right of all electoral voters in Saskatchewan?

Hon. Mr. Sonntag: — First of all, let me just say this to put it in context — there's no other way to say it — as the minister responsible in this department we cannot guarantee an absolute fair election. That is what we would hope for. But I can't guarantee that and nor can the department guarantee that.

But I think what can be affected is the relationship between our government and our department and the MNS. And by saying

that, if at the end of the day we don't think that the elected people out of the election as a result of . . . or any election, if we don't think that they represent the wishes of the majority of the Métis people, there is always an option for our government, or for myself as minister, to end the relationship with the MNS. I think that's an extreme example and I hope that doesn't happen. But I think we would want to review the relationship that we have.

But in terms of this government or this minister guaranteeing a fair election, we can't do that because the process, I mean, doesn't allow for it currently.

Ms. Bakken: — Thank you, Mr. Minister. Just one more comment and then I will turn it back to Ms. Draude, is that I believe that after the election in 2001, that there was an expectation by Métis people across the province that your government would act in a way to ensure that people that were eligible to vote would indeed be allowed to vote. And I believe that there is a strong feeling amongst many people that that certainly did not happen. And so if steps are taken after this election, I hope that they are followed through on for the good of all the Métis people in Saskatchewan. I'll turn it back to Ms. Draude.

Hon. Mr. Sonntag: — I'm just going to just respond very briefly and I want Donavon to supplement a little bit. I think you make, I think you make some good points. Let me say this, that in part of my preamble earlier on I talked about my view that there were more people, more Métis people who got to vote and I do believe that, just as I said, by what was evidenced even in my own community.

There have been improvements made and you may or may not be aware some of the changes with respect to the voters lists, as it flows directly out of the Poitras report, people were allowed to, if you were on the voters list you're allowed to vote. You're allowed to. If you're weren't on the list you were allowed to swear an affidavit at the . . . at the ballot boxes, or in the voting stations. And I'll ask Donavon to supplement that. There's other changes but I just don't know them up top.

Mr. Young: — In 2001 . . . I mean there's no question 2001 was a disaster in terms of the election. The only way Métis people could vote in 2001 was that you had to be on the voters list and the voters list was incomplete. Few people were on the voters list but there was no opportunity to be sworn in at the polling station in 2001. In yesterday's election there was that opportunity.

You could self-declare that you're Métis and be sworn in but you did have to show a membership card. I acknowledge that, that you had to show a membership card. And that brings up the issue around the backlog of membership cards. But there were people . . . There were people in my office, I can tell you, in my office who went to vote last night, were not on the voters list, submitted or showed that they had a Métis card, signed an affidavit that they're Métis and were able to vote. So that would be the significant improvement.

I spoke to people from Meadow Lake last night, as well, who were able to vote on the basis of this signed affidavit. So an improvement over 2001, which is what I think would cause the

minister and the department to believe that the voter turnout is better in 2004 over 2001.

Hon. Mr. Sonntag: — And let me just add one more thing to that as well. The former process, the process that used to exist, would not have allowed . . . if you weren't on the voters list, you simply couldn't vote. You couldn't appeal it, you just couldn't vote. But at least with the process that exists now for those that would claim that they . . . first of all that they would first of all acknowledge they weren't on the voters list, but then would claim that they were Métis and for some reason were refused the opportunity to vote or even sign an affidavit. The appeal process now exists for that.

Prior to this election, you couldn't even appeal it because you just weren't on the list, so you couldn't even appeal that. At least if there's some who feel disenfranchised even through this process, they can now appeal it which they couldn't do before.

The Chair: — Ms. Draude.

Ms. Draude: — Thank you, Mr. Sonntag. I appreciate these words but I do know, because last night I spoke to people outside the polling station who had been . . . had gone to vote and because they weren't on the voters list and they didn't have a card even though . . . Like I said, there was one lady who was 65 years old whose had a membership, been on the 2001 voters list, and she couldn't vote this year because she didn't have a card.

And I know that the minister has acknowledged as well that one of the problems was the number of cards that were actually sent out. It wasn't enough. They've been working on it for a number of years but they still . . . there wasn't . . . the cards weren't available to people. So even if they can appeal, the election is over. And so it's going to be next election before they can get back on again unless something would happen that would mean that there would be another election call, which I don't imagine it's anything most people want.

So I think that what our message is, is that the last election there was . . . 2001 there was 4,000 people we believe voted. The minister had indicated at that time that he was hopeful at this time there would be 12,000 people that could vote. I don't know what that number will be.

But our hope is and what we are going to be watching for is that the number of people that can vote next time will be everyone that has a right to. And we're going to be watching for that and listening for people . . . to people who say that they haven't been heard, that they haven't been allowed the opportunity to exercise their franchise. And if we're really going to allow Métis people to do their governing and to act the way they would like to under The Métis Act that we enacted, that we passed in this legislature two years ago, we're going to have to ensure that they have whatever it takes to make sure their elections are run in a fair way. It didn't happen last time. It didn't happen again this time.

And it's fine to say we hope it will happen next time, but without a time frame and without some real deadlines and somebody that's responsible, somebody saying this is going to be . . . we're going to hold on to this issue and we're going to

make sure it happens, people are still going to be . . . feel like nobody is listening. And that's not something I'm sure your office wants. And I know it's not something that we on this side of the House want. Everybody has to have a voice.

Minister Sonntag, I have a couple, a few other issues I'd like to talk about, and one of them is the new tobacco Act that has been brought into the House and something that I know the Minister of Health has discussed a lot. It was brought in under his department. But I know from your, through your Department of Aboriginal Affairs it's something that all of . . . that people, Native people would talk to you about.

And I was kind of surprised yesterday when I received a copy of the written question that was asked by the member from Rosthern asking if the proposed legislation ban would be applicable and enforced on Saskatchewan reserves, and the answer came back that it does apply on reserve land. At the same time I've had discussions with FSIN (Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations) that say no, this is a jurisdictional matter and something that we feel is . . . the government is going outside of their mandate when it comes to telling us what can be and can't be done on reserves.

I would believe it is a jurisdictional matter, and I think that what the Aboriginal people are saying is we need to have some input. We wanted to be at the table, we wanted to . . . the discussions. And even though I'm sure the majority of people would hope that denormalizing tobacco is what . . . is the goal, there still is jurisdiction involved.

So could you tell me what kind of input your department had when it came to the discussion with the Minister of Health on tobacco?

Mr. Cotter: — Maybe, Ms. Draude, I could respond to that. Discussions did take place between the Department of Health and our department with respect to the tobacco legislation. Discussions have been underway with the First Nations and the FSIN regarding the legislation.

The province's position is as follows. The tobacco Bill is a Bill of what is referred to as general application, and as a result it has application on-reserve as well as off-reserve. Understandably, some First Nations and some First Nation leaders would prefer that the Bill not apply on-reserve, and they would be entitled to test the question of whether this is a law of general application.

The province's view is that we are on firm legal ground from a kind of legal and constitutional point of view, and also that the Bill is really good public policy in terms of the health of all citizens, First Nations and non-First Nations. Indeed, as I think you would know probably better than me, the health indicators of First Nations people are often poorer than those for non-First Nations and anything that any of us can do to strengthen those indicators is probably a good idea.

This position that I have described has been, I think, respectfully but fairly clearly communicated to the FSIN and First Nations leaders and is the position the government intends to pursue in the implementation of the tobacco Bill.

Ms. Draude: — Thank you. I do recognize that — as does probably the majority of the people in Saskatchewan — that smoking is not beneficial to anyone. And I don't think the issue that we're discussing is the actual smoking. It's jurisdiction and ensuring that people have rights and that jurisdictional responsibilities are looked at.

So when it comes to having a working relationship with First Nations people, I think it's imperative that this Bill was introduced with the sanction of everyone. I'm trying to visualize what would happen if the Bill was passed and people on the reserves said no, I'm not going to look at this Bill. Is somebody going to be policing this Bill on reserves or how would that be handled?

Mr. Cotter: — I think our expectation is that we will achieve a good consensus in terms of the implementation of the Bill. If not, what you describe as a hypothetical is at least possible. Or probably more realistically, if there turns out to be significant resistance to what seems like good public policy, there would be some kind of court challenge and it would be sorted out in that way. And while that would be disappointing and probably delay the implementation or non-implementation of the Bill on reserves, or could lead to that, that's not uncommon. You can see lots of circumstances in which people legitimately wish to test the limits of a government's jurisdiction. And if it comes to that we will work that out in a respectful, but I think, clear way on both sides.

Hon. Mr. Sonntag: — I'm just going to add a bit to that just so there's a record of this. The Minister of Health and myself also met with Vice-chief Morley Watson in advance of the introduction to talk about this issue. He clearly is of the same view as you and I are on this, that smoking is not good for you.

And it is I think also acknowledged by Vice-chief Watson that within the First Nations community there are certainly circumstances where it's in some cases it might be worse than sort of the provincial average even. And he's quite concerned about that, particularly for young First Nations children.

He as well, I think it is fair to say, made a commitment to work with the province to try to achieve consensus on this, acknowledge that the point that you make might be an issue with some different First Nations, but at the same time continues to work with the province and with most of the Department of Health to try to achieve consensus and to ensure that there is, in the end of the day, maybe no smoking at all in our province. I know that's a bit idealistic, but he generally shares the same goals as we do.

Ms. Draude: — Thank you. Mr. Minister, the next issue I'd like to hear from you on is the issue of the MRI (magnetic resonance imaging) that has been suggested by the Muskeg Lake people. Their goal of course is to have an MRI clinic on an urban reserve land in Saskatoon.

And I know from the latest budget that your government has acknowledged that there is a definite need for MRIs and that there is a huge waiting list for the service. I know that the Minister of Health has indicated that it's not something that the government is in favour of at this time. Can you tell me what kind of input your department had on this issue?

Hon. Mr. Sonntag: — As the minister responsible only was made aware by the chief himself of the First Nation that it was a concern of his and an objective of his, and since then they've dealt directly with the Department of Health. Only through a letter and through a brief conversation was I made specifically aware of it — by the chief directly, I'll say that — but then after that he dealt directly with the Department of Health.

Ms. Draude: — Mr. Minister, what kind of input does your department have when it comes to discussing the issue with the Minister of Health? Does your department feel that it's something that would make a positive difference with Aboriginal relationships and for the people of the province?

Hon. Mr. Sonntag: — I don't think the department would have a specific view on that. In circumstances like this, the department — and my deputy can assist me on this — but in most circumstances like this, we would simply facilitate meetings, in this particular case with the appropriate department which is exactly what we did. And we wouldn't be in a position where the department would be offering an opinion on this, on this specific case because I think it's fair to say, you as well would see this as a Department of Health issue.

Ms. Draude: — Mr. Minister, one of the statements that you made when you started our estimates today was the importance of education surrounding Aboriginal people in our school system. And I do know that there are a number of teachers and classrooms that have been doing a lot of work through personal development, it may . . . or courses to understand some of the Aboriginal history.

But I believe that it's time that we had some mandatory Aboriginal education in school systems. I think it would be a benefit to all people, all students in the province, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal. And I'm wondering what your department's stand is on having mandatory Aboriginal education in our K to 12 school system.

Hon. Mr. Sonntag: — Well I think it's fair to say that on the issue of more education on this particular issue, I wholeheartedly share your view in terms of the need for much more education in this area and in this regard. I'm aware that the Department of Education — you're straying a little bit beyond my portfolio here, but let me attempt to answer the question nonetheless — the Department of Education is, as you may well be aware, is reviewing this very issue that you talk about to see whether this would be something that should be someday mandatory.

There is, I am aware, in a number of different school divisions and different schools — and even I'm aware even in my own community, albeit directed, I guess by individual teachers probably. But there is significant education in this area already. I know your question addresses, sort of, a much broader context than that, but the only answer I can give you right now is I'm aware that the Department of Education is looking at the very question that you raise, and I believe they would be providing some information on that before too long.

I'm thinking that my deputy might have some more information on that.

Mr. Cotter: — Just putting it in a little bit of historical context . . . if you or I were to think back about the amount of this kind of education or appreciation when we were in school, it was probably non-existent. And until probably recent times, it continued to be extremely modest. More recently the Department of Learning, I think, has been very aggressive in developing First Nations and Métis content for the core curriculum for the province.

As well as you may know, the Treaty Commissioner, Judge Arnot, has developed a program that includes, with the Department of Learning, training for teachers across the province to be able to teach a module on treaties in the classrooms of all of the schools in Saskatchewan. It is the first of many steps necessary to kind of build that bridge of understanding.

It is actually one of the reasons why in our Aboriginal Employment Development Program, one of the central things that we have supported has been cultural awareness training in the workplace. A lot of people for whom education in K to 12 has passed them by, they're on out there in the workplace, and to their credit. But to strengthen, kind of, inter-societal racial understandings, we've tried to build those modules into and with the employers, where a lot more Aboriginal people are coming to work to try to build that relationship.

So I think there is more to be done. But we are at least kind of on a continuum of schools, the working environment, trying to improve that bridge of understanding. And as you, I think, have identified, education and learning about it is the key.

Ms. Draude: — Thank you. I guess my concern comes with the fact that we have had . . . we have endorsed School^{PLUS}, and one of the signatories to the School^{PLUS} concept was the Aboriginal Affairs department. And I think in order to ensure that we actually do have all of our classrooms understanding the issue in as big a context as possible, we're going to have to make some giant steps and make some changes. And I think that education is one that is the key to making the changes to Aboriginal . . . the way we look at each other, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. We have to start with our youth and to get it into our classroom in a form that's mandatory.

So I do appreciate the work that the judge has done and the many teachers who basically have decided on their own . . . Nobody's forcing them to take this extra training or education, and it's great. I respect them. But at the same time it's still not something that has to be done. And if we're going to overcome some of the barriers that we have when it comes to growing the province, I think that this is something that should be looked at.

So I wanted to have your input. I know that as one department and signing on to School^{PLUS}, it's not only your issue. But when it comes to Aboriginal people, there is no way that there is any department in government that you're not part of because these issues address everyone.

Hon. Mr. Sonntag: — Well I think it's fair to say I wholeheartedly support the position that you take. And you may not have caught it when I made my opening remarks, but my deputy's just alerting me to it as well. He's just found it here. We have indicated, the department has indicated . . . I mean

that's why we supported the incorporation of First Nations and Métis content into all of the provincial core curriculum.

Let me just say, let me just make this observation . . . and I don't think this is a perfect science. But for those who are aware in this particular area, it is at least currently generally accepted that by the age of 12 — and because I want to make this point about the youth; you talked about the education of young people — it is generally accepted, and again I qualify that by saying current views are that by the age of 12 you have largely developed your set of values and what you think of other people and other cultures and other races by the age of 12. And it becomes infinitely more challenging after 12 years of age so the importance of education to young children, I think, on issues like this are just critically important. And again, that's why we certainly support the incorporation into the core curriculum. I mean there's nothing that you've said that I don't wholeheartedly endorse.

Ms. Draude: — Thank you, Mr. Minister. Another issue that's been . . . we've talked about a lot in the last year, and that is the inquiry into the Métis addiction . . . I think it's something that the Provincial Auditor is looking into at this time, and this morning I had the opportunity to talk to him about it. And he had indicated that, when his report is ready later on this summer or fall, the report will be given to cabinet, and then it's going to be up to cabinet to determine whether it's released to the public or not. Can you tell me, is your department going to be pushing to have this a public report?

Hon. Mr. Sonntag: — This particular one is, as far as I'm concerned, exclusively a Department of Health issue.

Ms. Draude: — So you won't have any input into this at all?

Hon. Mr. Sonntag: — I would as an individual cabinet minister, but no more than the — I was going to say the Minister of Highways and Transportation, but that's me too — no more than the Minister of Agriculture would, just as one voice around the table. So the department wouldn't offer a specific perspective on this.

Ms. Draude: — If we can look at holding two ministerships, then I am hoping you have two voices, and maybe it's something that we can ensure will be brought forward. Because I think it's really important, if we're going to again clear up any of the misinformation or the perception that there is some wrongdoing, then in order to do that, we're going to have to ensure that people are aware of the results of it. And I'll be asking the Minister of Health, but I'm sure that by doing this today he's aware I'm going to ask him that.

Mr. Minister, I know that not too long ago there was an article in the paper about the tax refund that was given as a result of a . . . I think it was a court decision on gas and tobacco tax that was collected at one time. And I had asked a written question about the number of other claims that were before the government when it comes to recognizing the amount of money that may be asked for because of collection of these taxes. I'm not sure what the amount is; I'm wondering if you have that figure handy.

Mr. Cotter: — Ms. Draude, we don't have the number at our

fingertips. A number of the claims and a number of the payouts by the province depend on individual bands and what they're able to show with respect to amounts of money around purchases of gas on-reserve over a period of time. We could obtain that information or ensure that it is answered in response to your written question.

My recollection was that, at one point a few years ago, we were projecting a total amount of rebate that would be required over a period of years — in the neighbourhood of \$10 million province-wide. I don't know whether that number has gone up or down as the work has been done with a series of bands or a series of claims have been entertained. The Department of Finance would have the most up-to-date information. But as part of the written question if that . . . I don't know what in detail your question asked, but if that included part of it, we can ensure that the most up-to-date information is provided.

The Chair: — Don.

Mr. Toth: — Thank you, Mr. Chair; to the minister and your officials. In the most recent budget a number of Aboriginal leaders raised some concerns regarding the provincial budget and your commitment to their community. And I quote out of, I believe it's the Prince Albert . . . *News-Optimist*: "The province has continually referred to the future of Saskatchewan and the demographics of First Nations people, and I'm wondering where is the investment in this future." And this statement was made by Mr. Morley Watson.

And so I'm wondering, Mr. Minister, in regards to that statement . . . And earlier on you mentioned about your commitment to First Nations people and especially when we think of the growing population, the youth, and the workforce, this growing workforce in the province of Saskatchewan, the concerns that would be raised by our First Nations leadership in this regard and your commitment as a government to working to address the needs of First Nations young people.

Hon. Mr. Sonntag: — Sure, I think it's a good question, and I had the opportunity to speak to Vice-chief Watson with respect to those comments as well. And I don't want to put words in the vice-chief's mouth, but I think essentially here's what transpired and why he said what he said, and as did other First Nation leaders across the province.

There was in 1992, as you may be aware, the 12-year agreement as it pertains to treaty land entitlement. And in 2004 that agreement came to an end. There was a reduction of \$10 million, I think, in our budget related directly to treaty land entitlement. So we had fulfilled that commitment and had paid all the funds into treaty land entitlement that the province was obliged to contribute. So there was understandably a large reduction in the budget specifically related to treaty land entitlement because we had completed our and committed . . . completed our commitment, I should say, to treaty land entitlement.

Having said that, we did increase the funding to what I identified as our top priority, the Aboriginal Employment Development Program, by some \$200,000. So what I would say in the areas that we see as delivery of services, we have increased the funding. And would I have liked to have seen

more money in the department? Absolutely I would like to have seen more money, because I think this is high priority. But at the same time I acknowledge that we were able to maintain an increase, at least in the area of our top priority, some amount of money, which I think small dollars in that particular area delivers huge results, and that's why the increase went there.

Mr. Toth: — Mr. Minister, you mentioned a \$200,000 increase, I believe you mentioned, to youth employment. Specifically, what would we be talking of here? What exactly would you be putting that money into?

Mr. Cotter: — With respect to the investment of the 200,000, this money goes into the Aboriginal Employment Development Program. It is the program that negotiates and gets into place partnerships with employers across the province.

The minister referred earlier to there being at this point 54 such partnership agreements with, oh, the University of Saskatchewan, the University of Regina, IPSCO, health districts, federated co-op, unions, and the like. The exercise there is to try to create an engagement between the employer and employers who will be in need of employees, and Aboriginal organizations and communities to be able to tap into Aboriginal people, usually young people who will be able to be qualified candidates for those positions.

The program is run on a modest budget, and \$200,000 is probably an increase of as much as 25 or so per cent in the budget. But it has produced approaching 2,000 employment positions for Aboriginal people, merely through the process by which employers more proactively seek out Aboriginal employees for consideration in their workplaces.

The program I think we would have liked to see grow at an even faster rate, but it has been one of modest but striking successes that we have had with respect to Aboriginal people finding work in the workplaces and being retained in the workplaces. And most of them start off as Aboriginal young people.

The program has been adopted by the Government of British Columbia, by the national congress of Aboriginal people as a model for effective and accepted ways of bringing more young people, more Aboriginal young people into workplaces for employers of all kinds within their respective provinces.

So far . . . and we think that there is room for it to continue to grow in the province so we will be looking to establish a series of additional employment partnerships with other employers, part of which is because employers are starting to realize that with challenges in the labour markets, the availability of qualified young people who come and work for them is not only helpful to the needs of Aboriginal people but critical to economic success for them and probably for the province as well.

Mr. Toth: — Thank you for that response. And it's very interesting, some of those comments.

This morning we met with the representatives of the energy sector in the province and that was one of the issues that they raised — some concerns about a real lack of people who are

employable to work in the energy sector as they've been kind of falling behind. The recruitment area, for awhile there was a lack . . . the sector wasn't growing as quickly as it had in the past and so they didn't need as many employees. And now there's certainly some renewed optimism in the sector. We look at oil prices and what have you and they find that their workforce is aging as well.

And no doubt, when we look at First Nations youth in this province, we certainly do have abundance, and we will have more in the future. And each and every one of those young people have a lot of gifts and abilities. And I guess one of the challenges is to ensure that they have adequate educational opportunities and are encouraged to, number one, beginning in the . . . at the high school level to achieve a grade 12 education certificate and then move beyond that.

I noticed . . . I believe it's today the employers address growing Aboriginal workforce. John Hill, deputy chief commission of the Saskatchewan Human Rights Commission says companies should review their hiring practice to make sure they are fair to minority groups. Now I think when we talk about reviewing hiring practices, I'm not exactly sure, Mr. Minister, that we would necessarily need to specifically look at reviewing hiring practices. I think a greater attempt needs to be made in the educational opportunities for especially First Nations youth. I have a sense that if the . . . and somehow I think we need to work with First Nations leadership in developing this.

It really concerns me that we have so many First Nations young people that don't seem to pursue higher levels of education when the opportunities are there. And it could be just the situations they're living in, but I think you and I can certainly point to a lot of First Nations youth who have really advanced in our, in our community in the workforce, and are doing very well.

So I think rather than just specifically looking at hiring practices, I think we need to make overall efforts to work with First Nations leadership to encourage our First Nations youth to realize that they are, have every gift and opportunity that anyone else does. If they would pursue these goal and achieve goals of higher education, that the opportunities in the oil sector or in the mining sector . . . I know we're seeing a lot of First Nations community hired in the mining sector and even in the business and corporate sector.

And I'd just like, Mr. Minister, your comments and your vision as the minister responsible for Aboriginal Affairs as to what we're going to do to encourage First Nations young people to pursue higher levels of education.

Hon. Mr. Sonntag: — Well thank you very much. Again you make some excellent points. The deputy will supplement my comments a little bit because of some of the discussions he's had with CAPP (Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers) specific to the point that you raise with respect to the energy sector.

Let me just provide this, first of all, anecdotal evidence if you will. I just know from the area that I represent, with six different First Nations in my constituency, there has been over the last few years a significant increase in the number of young

people from the First Nations working in partnership directly with the energy sector and directly employed.

With respect to higher levels of education, let me just provide for you the following statistics which I have cited in a number of speeches but which I think cannot probably be said too many, cannot be said too many times. Twelve per cent of all university students in Saskatchewan now are Aboriginal. Twelve per cent. Nineteen per cent of the students at the Saskatchewan institute of science and technologies are Aboriginal. And seven per cent of apprentices are Aboriginal, which is up from five per cent.

So there are improvements. We have a ways to go yet, but there have been some significant improvements in the last several years. And I think I would want Brent to talk a little bit about his discussions with CAPP.

Mr. Cotter: — The topics that you identified, Mr. Toth — and if I may say so, in your next career maybe you would be well-suited to be a deputy minister in this department — are exactly the kinds of things that we have thought were critical for success in this area.

In the example regarding the pipeline and oil and gas sector, the Canadian association of pipeline producers, CAPP, met with us in the late summer — actually met with the former minister — to identify his, the president, Pierre Alvarez's interest. And what he sensed was an opportunity to attract more Aboriginal people into work in a needed sector. I met with CAPP officials in the early fall last year in Calgary to determine the state of their own work and the degree of interest they had in pursuing partnerships that could be connected to training. CAPP was sponsoring or partnering with the federal government in doing a comprehensive study of the human resource needs in the oil and gas sector; a report that, I believe, came out in the wintertime.

In relation to that we have been communicating with our own educational institutions to try to identify the kinds of opportunities that can prepare Aboriginal people to get these jobs because there seem to be coming to be more and more. And the employment needs in the sector you are exactly right about.

I also think the point you make about the receptiveness of the employers needs to be addressed — is not the central point — meaning no disrespect to Mr. Hill's observations. We have begun to see very successful engagements. It's been the case in Alberta, it's been the case here.

You may be familiar, for example, with Alliance Pipeline which built a pipeline project across the province and worked with First Nations to create a terrific number of business opportunities for First Nations companies and significant employment for Aboriginal . . . particularly First Nations people in the construction of that pipeline.

So our own sense is that the oil and gas sector, while probably not having the same level of Aboriginal employment as a lot of other sectors, is interested in tapping into that as a labour pool that they think will provide reliable workers for them.

One part of what we have been doing in this respect then is

working with the Thunderchild First Nation. And we've entered into a small contract with them to explore what might be a kind of a framework for training opportunities for First Nations people in the oil and gas sector to get the kind of trade skills and certification that would enable them to win the jobs that are coming available. I can't tell you today that we have 1,000 First Nations kids all ready to snap up the jobs that might come available to drill oil and gas wells this fall, but I think a number of the pieces of the puzzle are coming together from the training institutions, the employer sector, and the First Nations themselves. So I think there's a lot of promise here and a lot of promise in an area that's needed for all of those sectors, including the province's own benefit. Thanks.

Mr. Toth: — I thank you. I think when we look at First Nations youth and certainly the opportunities that are available and will be available in the future, there are definitely a number of challenges out there. And Delphine — I'm not exactly sure of the last name — Musk, of the Interprovincial Association on Native Employment, talks about Aboriginal people feeling isolated in the workplace and talks about the need for employers to educate staff on Aboriginal culture and issues.

And I guess that comes back to a comment you made earlier to my colleague about even in the educational field of just talking about First Nations culture so young people across this province begin to get a better appreciation for the First Nations community as well as First Nations or Aboriginal youth in this province.

I think one of the senses I get is a lack of self-confidence that we see. And another concern that I have, a bit of a concern, is while we talk about the First Nations campus on the university, in some way I hope that isn't just another segregate facility, that we get young people from all sectors of society intermingling and beginning to show appreciation for each other. Because I think that's kind of what's, you know, Delphine is talking of here.

When a First Nations young person arrives at the workplace, especially if that might be a situation where they're maybe the first ones on the scene, all of a sudden they're put into an environment that they may not be totally aware of or comfortable with. And to have people at that workplace begin to understand their needs and reaching out to them so that they can realize that there is a real opportunity for them. And I think these are some of the issues that we certainly need to work at and to address.

And I think again it comes back to not only the educational field but even First Nations leadership recognizing that they need to go beyond and reaching out to community and in the involvement as well from the employers — whether it's the mining sector, whether it's the corporate sector, or the gas sector.

The fact that they would begin to look at the potential workforce that's out there and develop not only employment opportunities but educational opportunities and begin to present themselves in some ways too. Like we have these in our school networks now where you have days at school field trips, if you will, to go and look at potential employment opportunities that young people are taken to, ensuring that the First Nations

community is aware and is included in this.

I think we need to do everything we can to reach out because they are part of our community and our province. And I believe it's important that they're recognized that their role . . . they can play a significant role in the growth of this province.

Hon. Mr. Sonntag: — Let me just make a couple of observations as well with respect to your comments which I again of course largely agree with. And I think it's appropriate to talk again a little bit more about the Aboriginal Employment Development Program. In my opening remarks as well we talked about the 7,000 employees that have received cultural awareness education. We think that is critically important.

I think the model that we have developed under the Aboriginal Employment Development Program is the model essentially that we see as the model that will work. It stays away from quotas because I think quotas or equity programs, if you will, have . . . well I think the intentions were good. I don't think they have achieved the objectives that many governments and people like you and I would want to have achieved. And that's why it's much more about making the workplace ready and making employers and fellow employees aware through a program like this of what the representative workforce really is in Saskatchewan.

We say we have roughly 14 per cent Aboriginal people — 10 per cent roughly being First Nations and 4 per cent roughly being Métis. And I think across the province right now we're representative of six and a half per cent within the workplace so that says that we have some opportunities yet ahead of us. And through this model that we've developed, we're seeing an increase in the number of young people and Aboriginal people, period, being employed and I think that's why we want to continue to follow this model. And I absolutely agree that, you said it in a little bit of a roundabout way, as maybe I'm doing right now as well, I don't know, but the quota system just doesn't work the way it should.

Mr. Cotter: — Your observation about the willingness of the private sector I think is becoming more and more true. For a period of time, I think there was a sense within the government that we were leading this. I don't know that necessarily we are falling behind, but it is clear that the private sector is very supportive and recognizes this as a need to respond to the interests of businesses and communities and Aboriginal people.

And one recent example I think underwrites this significantly is related not to specific employment but more the educational and cultural awareness understanding dimension of it. As you may know, Mr. Toth, we have within the department a project to revitalize and build a significant addition to Government House here in Regina. And that project is being partly funded by the federal government, significantly funded by the province, and also funded by the private sector. And we established a foundation to raise about a third of the money for the project.

The foundation members are a series of people, almost all of them drawn from the private sector, and none of them with any particular political alignment that I'm aware of. In their work and in their interests and in the interests of the private sector that are donating to this project, they have insisted, and some

donors have specifically funded, a component of this revitalized Government House that will have an interpretation component related to the history and culture and identity of Aboriginal people in the history of Saskatchewan. And in one case, that is a condition of the contribution by one of the private sector donors.

And that was not something where Donavon Young or I or one of our staff went out and said, this is something that might be attractive for you to sign up with. This came to us from them, kind of a leadership from the outside, if I could say. And for me, those kinds of decisions produce probably more hope than any number of policy ideas we might generate within the government.

Mr. Toth: — Thank you. The reason I've been pursuing these issues because I think a lot of the First Nations community that I've had the pleasure of meeting with, and certainly in my constituency as the minister mentioned, the number of reserves — there's a number in the Moosomin constituency — and one of the reserves kind of sparked my interest.

They have developed a centre called the Marieval Enterprise Center. And when I was talking to leadership at the centre last year, the reasons they developed it — and this happens to be on the Cowessess First Nation — is they felt that while young people were leaving . . . were receiving a grade 12 certificate, that that grade 12 certificate didn't necessarily always have the same level of education that off the reserve would have. And their endeavour was to help these young people move beyond and have the educational tools that would bridge the gap and allow them to move into the SIASTs (Saskatchewan Institute of Applied Science and Technology), the technical institutes, or the universities.

So I think, I guess in a roundabout way I'm saying, the fact that the First Nations community themselves are beginning to realize that they have to do something to help themselves is a positive aspect. And by working together with them and recognizing this and assisting them goes a long way rather than berating the community. And I certainly think that's appropriate.

A major concern I think, Mr. Minister, is the fact however of fetal alcohol effect. And I don't know whether your department has much of an involvement in that area, but I believe this would be a concern that we need to take a look at very carefully, because certainly as more and more of the young people who have had this FAE (fetal alcohol effects) syndrome become older, it certainly impacts their abilities.

And I'm wondering what efforts are being made working with the First Nations community to address this concern so that we can really create a more positive role model, if you will, and opportunities for First Nations youth. As you mentioned we were talking earlier with my colleague regarding the effects of smoking and the concerns that First Nations leadership are beginning to realize the impact even in their community.

Hon. Mr. Sonntag: — Some of my officials may want to add to this, I'm not sure, but here's the way that we would deal with that issue through the department in the Métis and off-reserve strategy. And the public meetings that we have had over the last

several years, this issue I think has probably come up directly, or maybe in some cases indirectly, at almost every meeting.

And the meetings that I have attended say the same thing is true. We would discuss with the individuals at the particular meeting about some of the ways that we need to improve opportunities. And if you're not familiar with the strategy, it really is a process for the government to be out listening and hearing directly from those most affected.

And literally people have in the last, I think the last meeting . . . no, the second last meeting I was at a number of people just walked in off the street and provided for us what I would describe as very, very emotional testimonies about the difficulties of some of the lives that they have led and are leading, and some of the things that we need to do as a community and as a province to improve that circumstance.

So dealing directly with the issue that you raise, this issue comes up and what can we do as a province to try and effect some real change?

I think through the Department of Health there is some significant progress being made. There is clearly an acknowledgement through the Department of Learning that this has had significant impact on a very young and important population, and that there is I think a concerted effort now being made by a number of departments to address this issue, along with many community-based organizations. So I don't know, is it . . . Did you want to add something?

Mr. Cotter: — Maybe two or three specific examples, Mr. Toth. We are, as a department, responsible for the co-ordination of this Métis and off-reserve First Nation strategy. So while we don't deliver the programs, for example, in relation to fetal alcohol syndrome, it's our responsibility to try to make sure that the objectives that exist in the different departments, whether it's health or employment or the like, are held together and yet advanced.

One of the objectives is to — I don't have it at my fingertips — but significantly reduce the incidence of fetal alcohol syndrome in children that are born. I think that you've rightly identified the fact that fetal alcohol syndrome and effect seem to be visited upon Aboriginal children disproportionately in the population and as a result of . . . any success you can have in this area will be significant success for Aboriginal families and communities.

Secondly, a strategy that deals with disabilities, particularly cognitive disabilities, has fetal alcohol syndrome specifically built into this. This is led by the Department of Health and there is an investment being made in strategies to try to reduce fetal alcohol effect in young people.

I'm personally aware of some of the research that is underway in the Health department and in sectors that they support to try to find imaginative strategies to deal with this, because the consequences are lifelong and a significant burden for folks. As well, what has happened with respect to the investment of provincial money in early childhood development has a significant prospect of assisting with respect to fetal alcohol syndrome.

To be honest, most of the early childhood development money has come from Ottawa in relation to a series of social agreements between Canada and the provinces. The provincial money that came to Saskatchewan has been invested exclusively in communities that have high-risk factors for early childhood needs, for high-risk mothers, high-risk families and the like. As a consequence, with respect to Aboriginal people benefiting, sadly, at least for now, that means that early childhood development money is being significantly invested in communities with high populations of Aboriginal people because they're the ones of the greatest need.

But the investment in early childhood and the investment in these cognitive disabilities offers a prospect. If we don't, we end up with, as some people project, \$1 million in social costs for every child born with significant fetal alcohol syndrome. Aside from the loss to them, it's a significant social cost to society. And we just have to get those numbers down to more manageable levels. Thanks.

Mr. Toth: — I thank you, and thank you, Mr. Minister. Certainly you haven't been involved in the committee that was looking into some of the problems with child prostitution in this province and yes, we certainly were presented with some gripping stories — the challenges even First Nations community faces in this regard. And so I think every effort we can make to, if you will, work with . . . And first of all I guess the most important key is recognizing that there is a problem out there and beginning to . . . the first . . . once you've recognized that, beginning to work together to develop ways of addressing that question.

I want to come back to a comment the minister made a little earlier about the treaty land entitlement as well. And as I was looking at your budget, I noticed the budget is about \$10.7 million less this year than it was last year for Aboriginal Affairs. And it's my understanding that part of the reduction comes about as a result — and the minister I think mentioned it as well — of the Treaty Land Entitlement Framework Agreement. I'm wondering, Mr. Minister, if you could explain exactly what this means, the reduction. You've made a comment about fulfilling your agreement.

First of all, I'd like to know exactly what was fulfilled. And then when we look at treaty land entitlement, one of the questions that arose last year was provincial lands being available for . . . to meet the goals of some of the decisions by First Nations bands as they received their entitlement, to make some of those lands available. And I think there was a real question raised regarding long leases or pasture leases and what have you.

So if you could explain to me exactly what responsibilities the province had in the Treaty Land Entitlement Framework. When you say it's come to an end, exactly what does that mean? And is the 10.7 specifically or totally tied to the completion of that agreement?

Hon. Mr. Sonntag: — I think I will want officials to add a bit to what I'm going to say, but first of all I think there's a little bit of confusion not, maybe not a lot, but for those who are interested in this particular issue. First of all, the agreement was signed in 1992 as I'm sure you are probably aware, and it was a

12-year commitment. The end of the funding though, the fulfillment of the commitment with respect to the funding doesn't mean there's sort of an end to treaty land entitlement. There will be a number of different First Nations across our province who still have not achieved what is described as shortfall acres. There is no sort of time limit on how long they would take, how long they need to take with that money to achieve those shortfall acres.

So I suspect over the next number of years, because a number of First Nations have actually achieved their shortfall acres already, you will probably see fewer land acquisitions, I guess. But at the same time I think for some significant number of years yet you will still see First Nations still acquiring land for the purposes of achieving what is described as shortfall acres. So the money has been advanced by the province and the money is specifically targeted for those First Nations, or by those specific First Nations who are treaty land entitlement bands.

Correct me if I'm wrong here, but I think there are 29 First Nations in the province who are treaty land entitlement bands of the approximately 73, and I think 26 have signed in to the framework agreement.

Mr. Cotter: — You're right.

Hon. Mr. Sonntag: — Twenty-six have signed into the framework agreement. So that gives you also a sense of what the numbers are in the province. Again, I think there are a number of the public — and I think it's an important point to make — not to be critical, but many of the public think all First Nations are treaty land entitlement bands which they are not.

In addition to that, a point that was just raised earlier in the day actually, before we came into committee, what does achieving all of the shortfall acres, what does that represent in the province? And just a rough calculation would be that if all shortfall acres were achieved today it would represent roughly about two to two and a half per cent of the total land mass of the province of Saskatchewan. So this really, while it has been a controversial issue at times, really practically doesn't consume a large proportion of the land in the province.

And the other point I would want to make, at least historically, the land that has been part of the treaty land entitlement and part of reserve . . . and has been a part of the reserve has not been historically land that has had significant value either. I think that's changing some, which I think is good, but that's, historically, that's at least not been the case. I think my deputy wants to add one or two points.

Mr. Cotter: — During the 12 years since the agreement was signed, we have contributed in the low \$20 million per year to the Government of Canada, which then disburses that money with its own money to each of the entitlement bands. That money is then held in trust for the acquisition of land to meet this shortfall, that is the amount of treaty land that First Nations should have received at the time of the treaties but didn't get.

At the end of 2003-2004, our contribution into the framework agreement, that is the 20-some million or so, dropped. There were a series . . . there have been a series of individual bands

that have negotiated, predominantly on the same basis as the framework agreement, their own entitlements. And there are a few more bands who continue to have entitlements where the negotiations have not been concluded. So there are still a few more bands to work out and a few more years of payments with respect to those agreements.

The drop in money from '03-04 to '04-05 for the treaty land entitlement payment is eleven and a half million. So we went down from twenty-two three, down to 10 million seven fifty roughly. That eleven and a half million was therefore a drop in our treaty land entitlement funding. The department's budget dropped by a little bit less than that because we've been able to obtain a modest increase in some other areas, most notably Aboriginal employment development, to try to focus on the practical benefits of more employment. So we went down eleven and a half million roughly, with a few additions back in some other parts of the Aboriginal Affairs division.

Mr. Toth: — Just a question regarding this \$20 million. You mentioned, Mr. Cotter, that you've been sending \$20 million to the federal government. What would that \$20 million have been? It would seem to me that most people would just accept that anything to do with First Nations would totally be the responsibility of the federal government. Why would the province be advancing \$20 million a year?

Mr. Cotter: — This requires me to just go back a little bit in history. When the province was created, unlike most of the other provinces, Alberta and Saskatchewan, and for a long time Manitoba, when they became provinces, did not receive the land that other provinces received. It was continued to be held by the federal government as though we were a territory instead of a province.

In 1930 the Natural Resources Transfer Agreement, a constitutional agreement between Canada and the three western provinces, particularly Alberta and Saskatchewan, was worked out. And as a consequence of that, the land that was held by what would be called the federal Crown, was transferred to the province. The province became the owner of its own land. We became, in effect, a full and real province then.

Part of that deal though, was Ottawa having recognized, I think it's fair to say, that the Government of Canada had shorted First Nations in the land that was provided under the treaties. So there was a specific clause in that 1930 agreement that said if Ottawa ever has to pony up more land to meet its treaty obligations the province will be in for a portion of that, that portion is 30 per cent. And it was agreed in the framework agreement that was signed in 1992, that the way that we would do that as a federal and provincial government, is we would put in 30 per cent cash, Ottawa would put in 70 per cent cash, provide that in trust to First Nations, to then buy land from willing sellers.

So our contribution to meet that constitutional obligation, part of the deal of getting all of the land in the province, was to agree to put in our share if more land had to be ponied up to meet the treaties. And that's what the \$22 million a year was doing over the last 12 years.

Mr. Toth: — Thank you, Mr. Cotter. Mr. Cotter, you

mentioned, Mr. Minister, a reduction of the \$11.5 million and some of the First Nations leaders are suggesting that there are other areas where maybe some of this funding could have been reallocated, or reinvested regarding . . . to address significant First Nations issues that are still outstanding. And I'm just wondering, Mr. Minister, have there been any discussions between your department, Aboriginal leaders, and the federal government regarding funding for programs or initiatives dedicated to Aboriginal youth?

Hon. Mr. Sonntag: — Let me just say the following: as well, you may have been aware through the election process our government committed to the development of an Aboriginal equity program as well. And we had committed, I guess, the redeployment of \$20 million over four years. In this budget year there is . . . for the first budget year . . . for this budget year there's \$500,000. It's not seen in the budget directly but it's within Crown Investments Corporation.

We've been talking with different . . . with the First Nation leadership about that, but in . . . that's some of the things that you won't see. It will look like a . . . I mean it doesn't show up in here, so there actually have been things that have been done.

I talked about the Aboriginal Employment Development Program which is on increase and this equity program which is . . . there wasn't a large amount of money put into it for the first year because we're still developing the policy around it, and it will be housed within Crown Investments Corporation and administered through Crown Investments Corporation. And I know that many First Nations are excited about the opportunities that might exist here.

Mr. Cotter: — The other thing that the province has committed to do is to try to create — recognizing that the province is responsible for a number of significant Crown corporations — the need for more youth and particularly Aboriginal employment in those Crowns. And as a result, the Crown Investments Corporation has committed \$20 million over the next four years to aggressively pursue opportunities for young people and particularly young people who are of Aboriginal descent to be able to join the workforce in those large employers.

That's not drawn, as far as I'm aware, directly out of the decline in treaty land entitlement savings, but nevertheless provides a significant opportunity for investment to enable Aboriginal people to participate more fully in work and life and jobs in the province.

Mr. Toth: — Mr. Minister, I think my colleague has a number of questions that she'd like to get into as well. But I'd like to address one question in regards to the water levels on the Qu'Appelle River chain in our area. I know that a number of reserves have decided to negotiate on their own. You've heard of the QVIDA (Qu'Appelle Valley Indian Development Authority) along the Qu'Appelle Valley chain. And some reserves have decided to move away from the QVIDA agreement and get into their own discussion and come to agreements, and that water levels, I think, will be certainly addressed on certain lakes.

But there are a number of lakes down the chain that are still

going to be impacted significantly as a result of the ongoing stalemate in addressing this issue of funding for the . . . (inaudible) . . . that has taken place over the years. I'm wondering, Mr. Minister, if you could bring us up to date, and whether or not your department has been involved, had further involvement or discussion in coming to . . . encouraging the federal government to come to some kind of agreement and final decision as to how we can address this ongoing concern.

Hon. Mr. Sonntag: — Let me say first of all — and I know Mr. Talbot, who's been directly involved in this, will answer the detailed part of the question — this has been a very, very active file as I'm sure you can appreciate.

There has been . . . I do say and I suspect you're aware — even in the framing of your question, you're aware — that there has been some significant progress made in this particular area. I think it's fair to say we would like to have seen more progress yet. But I am much more optimistic now than I was sort of six months ago. We continue to work with the federal government as well to try to find a resolution to this. With respect to specifics, I'll ask now, Mr. Talbot, to give you details of what has been achieved so far.

Mr. Cotter: — Just before Curt speaks, maybe I could just provide a little bit of the context. In relation to these structures that have managed flooding over the decades, they have been exclusively under the responsibility, and accepted responsibility, of the federal government. It is true that in the exercise of preserving water levels from time to time, land on First Nations has been flooded and rendered unusable. One could debate its value or lack of value, but that has certainly been the case over some decades. And I think there is a perfectly legitimate argument for First Nations to say, you know, you flood our land to benefit others, surely there should be compensation.

Last year the Government of Canada indicated that it was only prepared to participate in what would be called forward-going compensation into the future, if the province was prepared to also participate. We weren't particularly happy about that. But it is the case that a number of provincial residents and citizens of the province were being significantly disadvantaged by the lack of resolution. The province agreed to participate and indeed put an offer on the table which was, I think, by almost any standard extremely generous to try to produce a permanent solution to this. You may recall that we offered to put into this pool \$6 million of provincial money to produce a permanent solution.

That did not produce a permanent solution, as a consequence of which there was a lot of manoeuvring around in the negotiations. The work for the province is led by Sask Water Corporation and particularly the Saskatchewan Watershed Authority which would have a direct and natural interest in the water.

In the last while, negotiations have taken place with individual bands as opposed to the whole group of QVIDA bands, Qu'Appelle Valley bands. And that has produced agreements, at least for 2004, with two of the bands that have now made it possible for us to stabilize the water levels on the Echo and Pasqua lakes.

Negotiations are continuing with respect to the bands that have a relationship and a degree of control over water levels further down the lakes. No resolution yet. We have got a kind of a half or maybe more than half a success with some prospects, but it is a challenge.

And we are now into the most challenging time of the year because, notwithstanding the rain that we got the last few days which was beneficial to almost everybody with the exception of my brother who runs a golf course . . . everybody else I think benefited from the rains it seems, and it helped the water levels a little bit. But that's not enough to stabilize the water levels over the summer unless we are able to achieve agreement.

I think Curt could talk a little bit more about the details of the negotiations. He represents our department's interests in relation to reaching a fair and complete solution here.

Mr. Talbot: — I'm not sure I can add a lot to that. As you know, Muscowpetung and Pasqua First Nations have entered into interim agreements. The western lakes are at their normal summer operating levels. The eastern lakes at Crook and Round — there's challenges there. The First Nations Sakimay, Cowessess, and Ochapowace have not yet come to the table. Let's hope that they will.

Whether there's any hope to restore lake levels this year is probably not. And we're disappointed by that, but hopeful that a long-term solution will be found in due course.

Mr. Toth: — Well I know I could pursue this further, but I know my colleague has some questions she'd like get off, so I'll step aside at this time, and maybe we can get into further discussion again. Thank you.

Ms. Draude: — Thank you, Mr. Deputy Chair. And, Mr. Minister, I have a number of other questions, and it's probably two or three different areas I'd like to touch on briefly. And I guess because of the real . . . because this department itself has many different aspects, there's lots of ways we could go today. And I'm just trying to get a feeling on some of the areas.

One of the ones that I'm concerned about is of course in the North. And you're well aware of the fact that the cost to ship produce up north and things like food and milk and baby supplies is expensive. I've done some cost comparisons between northern communities and right here in Regina, and it's considerably more to live in the North.

But the one area that seems to me the same regardless of where you are is alcohol. And I know that you can buy a bottle of beer for the same price here as you can in the North. And that seems to me to be an area that doesn't make a lot of sense.

I did a written question and found out that Saskatchewan Liquor and Gaming spent \$489,541 on freight to liquor and gaming stores across the province. And I know that isn't all to the North, but there's an amount of it that is. And I'm just wondering if when you're doing your budgetary items, is this an issue that you look into? Is it something that your government is wondering if it's really fair to northern people?

Hon. Mr. Sonntag: — Well it's not an issue that our

department would deal with directly, and it is one that probably is most specifically dealt with in the budget development of liquor and gaming specifically.

I think, just let me say as a general policy though, much like we would treat the delivery of services through our utilities, this is and has been the position of our government that the liquor stores would maintain public ownership. And as a result public ownership, as we are concerned, means that everybody gets the same product or the same service at the same price.

There will be those who will not think that's not the right way to do it, but that's the position of our government, so that . . . I'm speaking more from the perspective of government than I am of the department. I don't think our department would deal with that issue at all.

Ms. Draude: — Thank you, Mr. Minister. I guess the reason I brought it up is because I am concerned that in the North we have many of the people there are First Nations people, Aboriginal people that are living on less income than many people percentage-wise across the province. And yet they pay 30 to 40 or 50 per cent more for a litre of milk. They pay more for bread. They pay more for meat. And we do have lots of issues that are involved, and we have people that have difficulty spending money to buy food that they need.

So it's an issue that I'm concerned about. And I can hear you say it's not something your department deals with, but I'm sure it's something that other people have thought about if I have. So it's something that I think we'll discuss at another time because I guess it's government philosophy that runs it. But from my perspective, it's something that doesn't make a lot of sense.

Mr. Minister, I know something that you are discussing is the First Nations Fund, and there was changes in the way that this fund is actually audited now. And maybe you can just give me a bit of a breakdown or an understanding of how the relationship, the accountability issue now has gone from First Nations Fund to the First Nations trust in the last couple of years.

Hon. Mr. Sonntag: — Sure. Let me just . . . It clearly warrants a little response here, your previous point though as well. If, as a former minister of Crown Investments Corporation, if the hon. member is suggesting that we should form a new Crown corporation that would deliver milk across the province, we probably could do that at exactly the same price if you're in agreement with me on that.

Having said that, for those areas that the province does maintain public ownership, we deliver those services at the same price. But I mean you identify legitimately, without being sort of facetious here, you identify a legitimate concern but unfortunately or fortunately, I mean, it's a service that is provided by the private sector, and they include all of their costs. There is, for those publicly owned entities that do cross-subsidization, that's the rationale for cross-subsidization, and that's why you have a different price for some of those products in the North.

Let me speak briefly to your question now — or maybe not so briefly to your question now — of the First Nations Fund and the First Nations trust. The First Nations Fund is being

essentially grandfathered with the First Nations trust having come into existence roughly beginning of July '03 and probably more practically in August-September '03 when the first funds were actually transferred into the trust.

The rationale for the creation of the trust was, first of all, it was built into the gaming agreement. And it was part of the agreement with the FSIN that this new entity or new model would be created. It essentially duplicates the process that is followed by other levels of government. So in municipal governments, rural and urban, they are audited by a private sector auditor, and then the Provincial Auditor would oversee the audit of the specific department that would be responsible. That now holds true with us as well.

In addition to that, in the First Nations trust, there would be — and somebody could provide either me the specifics or probably easier if you do it yourself — there were certainly increased accountability measures put in place over what existed with the First Nations Fund. So there is more transparency and more accountability required under the trust. They are directly answerable through to our department, but they will now be audited specifically by independent and private sector auditors and the auditor, the Provincial Auditor will audit our department.

So the agreement — just to go back once more — the agreement to create the new trust is really about creating some parity, if you will, with the way other models of government function in our province. And that was, I think it's fair to say, largely as a request by the FSIN in the new gaming agreement that was struck in the recent past.

Mr. Cotter: — Just maybe two supplementary observations, Ms. Draude. In relation to the accountability arrangements that were put in place, a set of guidelines are included in that accountability that were reviewed by and, although the Provincial Auditor would have liked to have had maintained I think more direct oversight, he endorsed the guidelines with respect to a greater accountability discipline.

Secondly, and I think as part of that and probably the most important, is that there is now a regime in place where the First Nations trust will receive information from the individual First Nations who are recipients of that gaming money, and report that back to the First Nations trust so that the trustees, using their auditors, can satisfy themselves that the individual bands spent the money for the kinds of projects that are authorized for the money to be spent on. And that information we would be able to receive and, if necessary, request to be able to review ourselves.

We had not had that kind of discipline in the past. We have managed to achieve a similar kind of discipline with respect to the funding that goes to the four community development corporations that were established under the framing agreement as well. So while in those cases the direct auditing responsibility now resides with an independent private auditor that the particular entity retains, the First Nations trust for example, we will have . . . they will receive more comprehensive information from the bands regarding use of the money, and we will have access to that information as needed in circumstances where we have reservations or concerns.

Ms. Draude: — Thank you. I appreciate that answer. I know that the whole issue around the First Nations Fund and the idea that there was money that was misspent has caused concerns and your statement that there will be increased accountability and transparency is important. But the real important part is making sure that the people who are supposed to get the money, the ones that are really involved in it, feel that this is working right. I don't think it's as important that I know what's happening as the people that are involved in it and have a right to receive money from the fund.

And the concern, the public concern that it's no longer transparent to us, is an issue because of the history. And of course the perception now is something hidden. I feel a lot of confidence now that I have spoken to a number of First Nations people who are on the board, or who've been working with the board and they feel confident. So at the end of the day, why shouldn't I.

But at the same time, when you say that you do have the right to request if you feel there's a reason to review some of these files, that must mean that you kept that matter right there because, well, there must be a reason for it. Can you tell me why you would feel like if First Nations people have a right to do their auditing and they're going to look at the accountability and transparency issues, when will your department become involved in reviewing it?

Hon. Mr. Sonntag: — Let me just say first of all with . . . I think historically, and this, I think this is accurate but it will be my perspective, but I think my perspective is probably accurate in saying this. With the First Nations Fund, whether we agreed with it or not — and I'm saying we, the government, or the department — whether we agreed with it or not, I think the lack of transparency and the lack of sort of accountability was not that there was necessarily any inappropriateness with the funding. It goes back to your previous issue.

I think many First Nations just deemed it was their jurisdiction and it was . . . that there was no business for the province to be involved. That was their perspective. And that's why there was really a lack of transparency. Having said that, having gone through the signing of the new gaming framework agreement, the leadership, I think, within the FSIN acknowledged that even though they still believe this is an issue of jurisdiction for them, that there needed to be more transparency and accountability because it was problematic not just for us, but maybe more problematic for First Nations, if there wasn't at least a perception of transparency.

At the same time in going through the discussions — I wasn't personally involved with those — but at the same time going through those discussions, I am led to believe that, and I made this point earlier, is that they wanted the same accountability measures that exist with other levels of government in the province. So that's why we moved to the First Nations trust to have, as the deputy minister just alluded to, to have private sector auditors auditing the books the same way as we would have for an RM (rural municipality) or for a city. So too will now be the case for the different First Nations trust funds. That's why we've moved to that process. And I look forward, I think to — as you do, it sounds like — to increased transparency and accountability.

I don't know, I think I've answered your question. But if there's a specific . . .

Ms. Draude: — Mr. Minister, I had asked at what time you . . . where you may feel that it would be the right time to actually do some reviewing. You said you have the right. And I'm wondering at what time you would determine that you should be getting involved.

Hon. Mr. Sonntag: — Yes, I think it's . . . Yes, I remember the point you made now. The province I don't think has moved to this model because we specifically felt there was or there were, I should say, major problems. I think we have really moved to this model because it was a negotiated agreement with the FSIN around creating some parity with the rest of . . . with other governments in the province, and the result has certainly been and will be I think increased transparency and accountability. But it really is about creating equity across the province with respect to reporting mechanisms. That's how we got here.

I think it's fair to say it wasn't a belief by the province that we had to specifically get here because there was a huge amount of inappropriateness with the funding that was being provided. But I think all the parties involved agreed that there needed to be some improved process.

Ms. Draude: — Thank you, Mr. Minister. There are very many areas that we could be discussing today and I, for one, believe that this issue is one . . . this department is one that probably doesn't get the recognition that it deserves because it really touches people's lives and every one of the other departments. And Saskatchewan as a whole is going to be . . . our First Nations people are going to make a big impact on our future.

So I believe that we should be spending more time, not less. It . . . (inaudible) . . . be one little department that we talk about separate from the rest of government, and it's difficult to imagine how we can do that and get away with it. So I appreciate your answers today and at this time I think we could move adjournment.

The Chair: — Order. Order. Order. Order. Order. Order. It now being 5 o'clock, the committee stands adjourned.

The committee adjourned at 17:00.

