

The Assembly met at 1:30 p.m.

Prayers

ROUTINE PROCEEDINGS

PRESENTING PETITIONS

Mr. Krawetz: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, my petition is from people in the Carlyle, Redvers area. The prayer reads as follows:

Wherefore your petitioners humbly pray that your Hon. Assembly may be pleased to put a moratorium on the closure of the Plains Health Centre until they conduct a comprehensive review into the health crisis which we are currently experiencing.

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

I so present.

Mr. D'Autremont: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I also have petitions to present today. The prayer reads:

Wherefore your petitioners humbly pray that your Hon. Assembly may be pleased to put a moratorium on the closure of the Plains Health Centre to conduct a comprehensive review of the health crisis that we are currently experiencing.

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

These petitions come from the Saskatoon area, Mr. Speaker. I so present.

Mr. Toth: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As well to present petitions, but with a little regret, noting the presence of the former Speaker and the fact we're limited to one, but I'll present the petition I have today. Reading the prayer:

Wherefore your petitioners humbly pray that your Hon. Assembly may be pleased to put a moratorium on the closure of the Plains Health Centre until they conduct a comprehensive review into the health centre crisis we are currently experiencing.

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

Mr. Speaker, this petition is signed by individuals from the Redvers, Weyburn, Carnduff, Oxbow areas, and Arcola area of Saskatchewan. I so present.

Mr. Bjornerud: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I also have petitions to present. The prayer reads:

Wherefore your petitioners humbly pray that your Hon. Assembly may be pleased to put a moratorium on the closure of the Plains Health Centre until they conduct a comprehensive review into the health crisis we are currently experiencing.

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

The communities involved, Mr. Speaker, are Carnduff, Glen Ewen, and Alida. I so present.

Mr. Heppner: — I too rise to present a petition. And I read the prayer:

Wherefore your petitioners humbly pray that your Hon. Assembly may be pleased to put a moratorium on the closure of the Plains Health Centre until they conduct a comprehensive review into the health crisis we are currently experiencing.

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

And these are signed by the good people from all over Saskatchewan.

Mr. Gantfoer: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I too rise on behalf of people concerned about the closure of the Plains hospital. The petition calls for a moratorium on the closure of the Plains Health Centre until they conduct a comprehensive review of the health care crisis we're experiencing.

People on this petition, Mr. Speaker, are from the communities of Carnduff and Oxbow.

Ms. Draude: — Mr. Speaker, I also have a petition to present today.

Wherefore your petitioners humbly pray that your Hon. Assembly may be pleased to put a moratorium on the closure of the Plains Health Centre until they conduct a comprehensive review into the health crisis we are currently experiencing.

As in duty bound, your petitioners will ever pray.

People that have signed this petition are from Carnduff, Alameda, and Oxbow.

Mr. Belanger: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise once again to present a petition. And the petition reads as follows:

Wherefore your petitioners humbly pray that your Hon. Assembly may be pleased to save the Plains Health Centre by enacting legislation to prevent the closure, and by providing adequate funding to the Regina Health District so that the essential services provided at the Plains may be continued.

As in duty bound, your petitioners will ever pray.

And the people that signed the petition, Mr. Speaker, are primarily from Weyburn. And I so present.

Mr. Aldridge: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I too rise to present petitions on behalf of citizens concerned about the closure of the Plains hospital. The prayer reads as follows, Mr. Speaker:

Wherefore your petitioners humbly pray that your Hon. Assembly may be pleased to save the Plains Health Centre by enacting legislation to prevent the closure, and by

providing adequate funding to the Regina Health District so that the essential services provided at the Plains may be continued.

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

Those who have signed these petitions, Mr. Speaker, are from the community of Weyburn. I so present.

Mr. Osika: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I also present a petition on behalf of citizens of Saskatchewan concerned about the Plains Health Centre closure:

Wherefore your petitioners humbly pray that your Hon. Assembly may be pleased to save the Plains Health Centre by enacting legislation to prevent the closure, and by providing adequate funding to the Regina Health District so that the essential services provided at the Plains may be continued.

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

And the signatures on this petition are from Francis and Weyburn. I so present.

Mr. Goohsen: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm happy today to present the following petition:

Wherefore your petitioners humbly pray that your Hon. Assembly may be pleased to cause the government to reach necessary agreements with other levels of government to fund the twinning of the Trans-Canada Highway in Saskatchewan so work can begin in 1998, and to set out a time frame for the ultimate completion of the project with or without federal assistance.

As in duty bound, your petitioners will ever pray.

These all come from the community of Hazlet, Saskatchewan, Mr. Speaker, and I'm happy to present them on their behalf.

Ms. Haverstock: — Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I rise for the first time to present petitions on behalf of disenfranchised widows and widowers of Saskatchewan, and I shall read into the record the entire prayer, pardon me, the entire petition:

The petition of the undersigned citizens of the province of Saskatchewan . . .

The Speaker: — Order, order. It's only in order to read into the record the prayer itself and I'll invite the hon. member to proceed directly to that part of the petition.

Ms. Haverstock: — Mr. Speaker, I shall read the prayer:

Wherefore your petitioners humbly pray that your Hon. Assembly may be pleased to have The Workers' Compensation Board Act amended for the disenfranchised widows/widowers of Saskatchewan whereby their pensions are reinstated and the revoked pensions reimbursed to them retroactively and with interest, as requested by the statement of entitlement presented to the Workers'

Compensation Board on October 27, 1997.

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

And these petitioners today are from the Regina district, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. McLane: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise again today to present a petition on behalf of the people of Saskatchewan and I'll read the prayer:

Wherefore your petitioners humbly pray that your Hon. Assembly may be pleased to save the Plains Health Centre by enacting legislation to prevent the closure, and by providing adequate funding to the Regina Health District so that the essential services provided at the Plains hospital may be continued.

Mr. Speaker, this petition has signatures on it from, mostly from Weyburn, Estevan, and Fillmore. I so present.

Mr. Hillson: — Mr. Speaker, I have petitions this afternoon from citizens of the province concerned about our crumbling health care system and it's particularly about the loss of the Plains hospital. These petitions have been signed by the good people of Weyburn and Goodwater.

Mr. McPherson: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I join with my colleagues today in bringing forth petitions in efforts to stop the closure of the Plains hospital. The prayer reads as follows:

Wherefore your petitioners humbly pray that your Hon. Assembly may be pleased to save the Plains hospital by enacting legislation to prevent the closure, and by providing adequate funding to the Regina Health District so that the essential services provided at the Plains may be continued.

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

Mr. Speaker, the people that have signed the petition are mostly from the Weyburn area, but also the MLA (Member of the Legislative Assembly) from Moosomin. I so present.

READING AND RECEIVING PETITIONS

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

Of citizens of the province petitioning the Assembly on the following matters: the twinning of the Trans-Canada Highway; saving the Plains Health Centre; calling an independent public inquiry into Channel Lake; and the placing of a moratorium on the closure of the Plains Health Centre.

PRESENTING REPORTS BY STANDING, SELECT AND SPECIAL COMMITTEES

Standing Committee on Private Members' Bills

Clerk: — Mr. Johnson, as Chair of the Standing Committee on

Private Members' Bills presents the fifth report of the said committee which is as follows:

Your committee has duly examined the undermentioned petition for a private Bill and finds that the provisions of rules 64, 65, and 68 have been fully complied with.

Of the Conference of Mennonites in the province of Saskatchewan praying for An Act respecting the Conference of Mennonites of Saskatchewan.

Your committee has duly examined the following petition for a private Bill and finds that rule 64 and 65 have been complied with, and your committee is satisfied that the publication requirements of rule 68 have been met.

Of the Fondation de la radio Française et l'Association Culturelle Franco-Canadienne de la Saskatchewan, in the province of Saskatchewan praying for An Act respecting the Fondation fransaskois, 1998.

Mr. Johnson: — Mr. Speaker, I move, seconded by the member from Kelvington-Wadena:

That the fifth report of the Standing Committee on Private Members' Bills be now concurred in.

Motion agreed to.

NOTICES OF MOTIONS AND QUESTIONS

Mr. Goohsen: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I give notice that I shall on day no. 35 ask the government the following question:

To the Premier: how do you plan on getting the federal government to join with the provinces in formulating a national transportation policy which would bring more federal money to the rural road structure; in view of your recent statement that you have no more money for members of SARM (Saskatchewan Association of Rural Municipalities) and as the problem is largely, in your view, the results of rail-line abandonment and the abdication of federal government responsibilities to an interprovincial or national highway systems, how do you plan to achieve your goals; do you plan to be a bell-wether on this process?

I have another short question that I shall ask on day 35 of the Minister of Justice, Mr. Speaker:

What position is your office and the government taking with regards to the issues raised in the letter to Mr. George Thomson, deputy minister of Justice and deputy attorney general of Canada, written by J.P.R. Murray of the RCMP (Royal Canadian Mounted Police) as per copy of letter attached and tabled herewith?

Ms. Haverstock: — Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I give notice that I shall on day no. 35 ask the government the following questions:

(1) Prior to the formation of the Living Sky Health District in 1994, what was the ratio of management staff to primary care-givers in 1993 at the Lanigan Hospital, the Watrous

Hospital, and the Wynyard Hospital; (2) what is the current ratio of management staff to primary care-givers in the Living Sky health care district which takes in the Lanigan Hospital, the Watrous Hospital, the Wynyard Hospital, the Central Parkland Lodge, home care for the district, and other long-term facilities for the district; (3) what is considered to be an optimum ratio of management staff to primary care-givers in Saskatchewan hospitals and other health facilities housing patients; (4) what is the current average ratio of management staff to primary care at Saskatchewan hospitals and other health facilities housing patients?

Ms. Draude: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I give notice that I shall on day no. 35 ask the government the following question:

(1) How many individuals were asked to submit medical reports from physicians or medical specialists in 1996 as a requirement to maintain a driver's licence; (2) how many of the aforementioned individuals were required to cover the cost of obtaining these medical reports themselves for the purpose of maintaining their licence in 1996?

I have the same questions for 1997.

INTRODUCTION OF GUESTS

Hon. Mr. Wiens: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is a great privilege for me to introduce to you a member in our . . . a guest in our gallery. Her name is Vanessa Jack. She's from the White Calf Collegiate in Lebret. Vanessa is part of the cooperative education program at the White Calf Collegiate. A number of students are participating in this program.

She's been job-shadowing myself and people in my office for the last number of months, and I want to say what a delight it has been to have her as a regular participant in the work of my office. I wish her all the best as she proceeds with her education in her school and beyond.

I ask all members to join me in welcoming Vanessa to the House this afternoon.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Ms. Stanger: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would like to introduce to you and through you to the other members of the House, seated in your gallery are three very important people: John Brockelbank, former Speaker of this House and also a former MLA of mine; Bill McLean, a former employee of the city of Regina; and another former Speaker of the House, and I don't know if I should say a friend of mine, Herman Rolfes.

So, Mr. Speaker, I can tell you that today I will behave. And I'd ask the other members to welcome these people today.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Ms. Hamilton: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today it's my pleasure to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly, 50 grade 4 students from St. Marguerite Bourgeoys School. St. Marguerite is located in the south-east area of the city, a rapidly growing area, and you can understand

with 50 students in grade 4 why they look forward to expanding to a new school in that area. They're accompanied today, Mr. Speaker, by Betty-Ann Faber and Kathy Achtemichuk. I'm looking forward to meeting with them in room 218 following question period, after they've had a chance to tour.

I'm encouraged, Mr. Speaker, that my colleague says this afternoon she's going to behave. And I'd ask all members to join her in that behaviour so I have less to explain when I meet with my students.

In the meantime, I ask all members to give them a warm welcome.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Langford: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to introduce a guest from Melfort, a construction worker. Ray Cantelo is here to watch the proceedings of the House. And he tells me he's going to . . . he's a political person and he's going to be watching the . . . or keep the chickens on the run in Melfort. So I want everybody to welcome him here.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Mr. Scott: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would like to introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly, four guests in your gallery, Mr. Speaker. We have Gene Senft from the town of Lemberg — Gene's a foreman there — his wife, Anne Marie Senft; Marshall Hauck, the town councillor in Lemberg; and Dale Nelson who is the president of the Saskatchewan Water and Wastewater Association.

I'd ask those four individuals to stand up so we can see who they are.

I would like to, Mr. Speaker, say a couple of words about Gene. He is the first Saskatchewan water and wastewater facility operator to receive an unrestricted operator's certificate. This certificate meets the qualifications required by mandatory certification programs across North America. Gene, we are certainly proud of your achievement and hope that you will be a role model for other water and wastewater operators in our province.

And I would ask that all hon. members join me in welcoming the guests here today.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Osika: — Mr. Speaker, I would like to add words of welcome with the Environment minister to the good people of my constituency from Lemberg whom I visit very often. I'd also like to welcome Vanessa from Le Bret, and I'd particularly like to congratulate Wendel Star, who is the program coordinator, for allowing young people to work with various departments and find out what people do, and perhaps do not do on occasion, during the course of day-to-day life.

I'd also like to welcome the former Speaker of the House, Mr. Rolfes, and I want to welcome him because I still recall, when first elected and he had us on this floor of this Assembly, and put the fear of the Lord in us about what the Speaker's authority

was. And I remember that to this day, Mr. Speaker. Welcome.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Kowalsky: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to draw your attention to a gentleman who's sitting behind the bar on the government side — a good friend of mine and former NDP (New Democratic Party) MLA serving in the Shellbrook . . . no, the Prince Albert, I think it was Duck Lake area at the time. And served also for a brief time, I believe, as Minister of Northern Saskatchewan, what was known as the DNS (Department of Northern Saskatchewan) in those days, and that's Mr. Jerry Hammersmith. And I ask everybody to welcome Jerry to the legislature.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

STATEMENTS BY MEMBERS

Attack on Plains Hospital Nurses

Mr. McPherson: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, ugly is the only way to describe what some New Democrat MLAs tried to pull off last night. And I say some, because the Minister of Health was cringing and not part of this as he witnessed his NDP colleagues try and stage a personal attack on Darlene Sterling and Lenore Schmelling.

These are two emergency room nurses at the Plains hospital who have no political affiliation to any party. They believe the Plains should be saved, they believe the decision to close the Plains is wrong, and they are fighting for what they believe in.

What was attempted last night was politics at its worst — a vicious personal attack against individuals because they dared to oppose the decision being made by this government.

Mr. Speaker, you speak often about the importance of democracy, yet members of your caucus, those from Regina South and Weyburn-Big Muddy, think nothing of attempting a hatchet job.

The 500-plus people who attended our Save the Plains meeting in Weyburn last night didn't buy the act. They roundly booed the act and proceeded to give a standing ovation to these two nurses.

Isn't it ironic that in the home town of Tommy Douglas, NDP members would provide people with a demonstration of politics at its absolute worst.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Professional Secretaries Week

Ms. Stanger: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This week has been proclaimed Professional Secretaries Week and today is Secretaries Day.

During this week, those of us that are fortunate enough to have support staff have the opportunity to state publicly what we should realize all year around, to say thank you to them. Without the aid and support and encouragement and tolerance

of our secretaries, we would not be the finally honed, exceedingly efficient, superbly organized group of members.

One thing we should think about doing for Secretaries Week is changing the name. The term "secretary," with its outmoded image of shorthand, typing, errand running, and little else, does not begin to do justice to the many complex and difficult tasks which our assistants perform. How about this, Mr. Speaker — administrative assistants.

As other speakers have said in previous years, it would be worthwhile, a humbling experience, if once a year we were given an impossible task to perform in an unreasonable time — our secretaries do this daily. We might not say it often or loudly enough, but we do know how important they are, and on behalf of our caucus, we thank them for their service and their friendship. Thank you.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Krawetz: — Mr. Speaker, I'd also like to join with our colleague from Lloydminster.

Mr. Speaker, we mark a very important day. Today we honour those people who helped all of us be a little more organized, remind us of our appointments, and answer our phones, which seemingly ring non-stop these days. Of course I speak about our secretaries.

Without our administrative assistants, which I know they prefer to be called, where would any of us be, Mr. Speaker — probably at the bottom of a large pile of unfiled and unanswered mail, that's where. Of course the duties of our assistants go much beyond simple filing and typing. They are an integral part of our office. More than assistants, more often they are our partners in the workplace, and an irreplaceable one at that.

So on this day which we honour these hard-working men and women, we should remember that they deserve to be remembered and thanked, each and every day of the year. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Earth Day

Ms. Murray: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today is Earth Day, a day proclaimed in 1970 during which we should recommit ourselves to restoring, renewing, and preserving the environment of this planet Earth, our island home, as the Anglican prayer book describes it.

I want to congratulate the students of Winston Knoll Collegiate in my constituency who yesterday did more than talk about the environment; they spent the day cleaning it up around their neighbourhood — actions, not words, which is what Earth Day should be all about. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Town Meeting on Grain Transportation System

Mr. Heppner: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Last night I was

fortunate enough to be able to attend one of the meetings that Mr. Estey's holding around the province, held in my home town, and it was rather exciting to see some of the events that were taking place.

Mr. Estey gave a statement of his understanding and it was very impressive to see the knowledge that he has of a very complicated system. And I think that bodes well for some hope for the report that he is going to give.

RM (rural municipality) reeves were out there in force, Mr. Speaker, basically asking for financial help from both the provincial and the federal government and also for a highways plan.

It was also good that the support there came from . . . the member from Carrot River was also there and he had brought with him all of his supporters, almost one bus load.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Samuel McLeod Awards

Hon. Mr. Lautermilch: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On April 20 in Prince Albert, outstanding businesses were recognized at the annual Samuel McLeod Awards Banquet held in the Marlboro Inn, and I'd like to take this opportunity to acknowledge the coordinating committee, the awards sponsors, and of course congratulate the very deserving recipients of the Samuel McLeod awards.

In particular, sir, I'd like to recognize the individual who has made a very significant impact and contribution to our economy, Mr. Jack Matheson of Matheson's Men's Wear, who was recognized that night.

Other awards that were presented, new product or service was presented to Plaza Hobbicrafts; the new business award presented to Six Shooters Saloon; service industry award was presented to Lakeland Ford Sales; the investment award was presented to Malenfant Enterprises; the community involvement award was presented to Ashley Cabinets; job creation to Provincial Forest Products, as well as the business of the year.

I want to congratulate, Mr. Speaker, all of these very fine businesses who make our community as positive a place to live and to work as it is.

And before I take my place, Mr. Speaker, I want to acknowledge the presence again of our two former MLAs, Mr. Brockelbank and Mr. Rolfes. And I want to indicate to them my pleasure that they would take this time away from their very important schedule of golfing and leisure to share these moments with us today.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Pay Equity for Women

Mr. Aldridge: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to rise

today in response to the concerns of the pay equity coalition of Saskatchewan. I see a government across from us here today that are the masters of smoke and mirrors. They promised pay equity in 1991. Seven long years have gone by for the women of Saskatchewan and with a few small exceptions, the women of Saskatchewan are no closer to any meaningful pay equity than they were when this government came to power.

It's yet another one of their string of broken promises. And again, Mr. Speaker, their back-benchers are huddled under their cone of silence. In fact, Mr. Speaker, the report, "Economic Gender Equality Indicators," has found the gap is widening in Saskatchewan. This just goes to show that the NDP's so-called plans are nothing more than paper dragons. And it's further evidence that this government is losing its ability to care.

In closing, Mr. Speaker, I'll let the House know and everyone else across this province, that the Liberals stand strong for the principles of equal pay for work of equal value. Thank you.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Drug Abuse Resistance Education Program

Hon. Mr. Wiens: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today I would like to congratulate the RCMP and the students of the Rosetown Walter Aseltine School who are the first graduating class of the Drug Abuse Resistance Education program, or D.A.R.E., in the province of Saskatchewan, introduced to students from the Walter Aseltine School in February of this year.

It is a unique, comprehensive, prevention education program which is designed to equip elementary school children with skills to recognize and resist social pressures to experiment with tobacco, alcohol, and other drugs.

The D.A.R.E. program, which was offered to students as an initiative of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, teaches students about issues like self-esteem and peer pressure as well as the detrimental effects of getting involved with drugs, smoking, and alcohol.

The program's ultimate goal is to give our young people the courage to say no to drugs and become role models in our communities.

In addition, students gain an appreciation for who they are as individuals and the important roles they play in their families, school, and community.

The program was well received by students, parents, and educators alike, and is sure to be used as an effective tool in combating drug abuse among teens in our communities.

I want again to congratulate not only the first graduating class of D.A.R.E., but also the parents, educators, and RCMP officers whose hard work brought this unique program to Saskatchewan.

Thank you and best wishes to all of you as you dare to make a difference.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Saskatoon Paralympians

Ms. Lorje: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This Monday in Saskatoon there was a reception to honour two outstanding and inspiring athletes. Between them, Marni Winder and Colette Bourgonje claimed five of the twelve medals won by Canada at the recent Paralympics in Nagano, Japan. Colette won two silver medals in cross-country sit skiing. Marni took a silver and two bronze medals in alpine low vision skiing.

Mr. Speaker, skiing is a sport for those more courageous than I. These women not only ski, they ignore their physical limitations and engage in competition at the highest level. In fact Marni did not begin competing until she began to lose her peripheral vision. That commitment and that courage is admirable.

In addition to Colette's medals, she is a teacher at Brunskill School and on Monday she found out that she's also being honoured by having a street in Saskatoon named after her. This is very appropriate since she started her Paralympic career racing on Saskatoon streets. I was very proud to be involved in organizing some of those early road races for Colette.

With these two athletes in our province, it is also appropriate that on Monday it was announced that Saskatchewan will host the 1999 World Cup Disabled Ski Competition. We already know who two of those medallists will be. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

ORAL QUESTIONS

Plains Health Centre Closure

Mr. D'Autremont: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My questions are for the Minister of Health. Mr. Minister, over the past two nights both you and I have attended public meetings about the closure of the Plains hospital and you have heard a lot of very angry people. A lot of people who feel betrayed by your NDP government. A lot of people who have personal stories about their experiences at the Plains. Surely this must be starting to have some effect on you. Are you going to listen? Are you going to step in and reverse this terrible decision and keep the Plains hospital open?

Hon. Mr. Serby: — Mr. Speaker, I want to first confirm and say to the member opposite that I, like he, have been at the public meetings now and I've been at three of the public meetings across the province. And the Liberal meetings have been well organized without any question and the involvement of the public has been, in my opinion, well received.

And I want to say to the member opposite that throughout the meetings there has been a great deal of emotion expressed about the loss of the facility — about the loss of the facility — and a great deal of discussion about the fact that there's going to be significant loss of service, which the member opposite talks about and the Liberals talk about. And throughout the last meeting, Mr. Speaker, we were able to reaffirm, I say in Weyburn, the impact is finally to make sense.

It's finally making sense because the people are accepting that the services are going to be moved from the Plains to the General Hospital, that services are going to be better, that physicians will not leave the province, that we're going to have as many hospital beds as in the past. Mr. Speaker, the public is understanding what the Liberals and the Tories are saying in their fearmongering about what's happening with health services around the province.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. D'Autremont: — Mr. Speaker, indeed the attendance at these meetings has been very good but the reception for the minister's message has been very poor for him except for his hacks that get up to the mike once in awhile but get booed away from it.

Mr. Minister, the other night in Indian Head you made a very telling comment. You said, I'm not here to talk about the future — I'm not here to talk about the future. Well if I were you I guess I wouldn't want to talk about the future of health care either. There's no future for health care under your government. I don't imagine you want to talk about the past either. You don't want to talk about how you've broken every NDP promise to reduce waiting-lists and to keep hospital beds open.

Mr. Minister, there are a lot of people who do want to talk about the future of health care and they are giving you an earful. The question is, are you listening? Mr. Minister, will you today announce that you have heard the message and the Plains hospital will remain open?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Mr. Serby: — Mr. Speaker, every day in this province when I get an opportunity, I speak about the future of health care in this province. And in no other provincial jurisdiction in Canada, Mr. Speaker, has there been more accomplished in health care than there has been here in Saskatchewan — nowhere else in the province.

At the expense, Mr. Speaker, of what the member opposite talks about, the past Tory, and I want to quote, Mr. Speaker, about what his leader said — and who still I believe is his leader, the member from Kindersley — when he said, during his opening comments on health care, he said this:

Boyd gave cautious praise to the NDP government for closing rural hospitals that needed to be closed.

That's what he said. And then he goes on to say, Mr. Speaker, he goes on to say that:

We have to come to grips with the attitude of health care services in this province and that health care services in this province are working.

Mr. Speaker — are working. And that comes from the member opposite when he was a Tory member, and I say to the members opposite that today in Saskatchewan — today in Saskatchewan — we have the best health care services anywhere in Canada, and we will continue to provide the kinds of funding that's necessary to increase and secure health care services in this

province.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

National Child Benefit Program

Mr. Toth: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, my question is for the minister responsible for Social Services. Mr. Minister, there's a great deal of anticipation about the National Child Benefit Program which comes into effect this July.

However, Mr. Minister, the Welfare Rights Centre in Regina is concerned that not all of the money will go to the children it is supposed to help. In fact, Mr. Speaker, the executive director of the centre, Morris Eagles, says that money may be misspent if it goes to parents with alcohol, drug, or gambling addictions. Under the current system, your department actually has trustees to deal with that problem. But that safeguard will be removed when the National Child Benefit comes into effect in July.

Mr. Minister, are you concerned about this problem? Have you spoken to the federal government about this problem, the problem that's been raised with us today?

Hon. Mr. Calvert: — Mr. Speaker, the answer to the latter question is absolutely yes, we have been speaking to the federal government about this very issue. But to put the issue in some context, I want the member to know that in the current welfare system if we believe a family may not have the capacity to appropriately provide benefits to their children, we place that family under what we describe as trusteeship, where in fact the welfare cheque is provided to the trustee who then works with the family.

But to put this in a perspective, Mr. Speaker, 1.7 per cent — 1.7 per cent of all families receiving welfare benefits in Saskatchewan — are placed on trusteeship.

Even though it is that small, we are concerned about this issue. We have been talking to the federal government. It is the federal government which simply will not engage funding to a third party of trustees, and we are continuing to talk to them about this very important issue.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Toth: — Mr. Speaker, a further question to the Minister of Social Services. Mr. Minister, your government is putting millions of dollars into this new program and that's what you've acknowledged.

If you're putting all this money in, I think you should really be concerned about the fact that it actually gets to children. Morris Eagles of the Welfare Rights Centre says, and I quote:

If that money is being delivered into the hands of problematic parents and that money is being wasted, it means that there is going to be no money in the home for food, for clothing, for personal expenses for the children.

Mr. Minister, all the money in the world isn't going to help the child poverty program if it can't ensure that money is getting to the children who need help.

Mr. Minister, you say you're talking to the federal government. Well what are you really doing about it? Why aren't you pressing the federal government to allow you to disburse the funds if you already have the program and the safeguards in place to deal with the concerns that are being raised?

Hon. Mr. Calvert: — I want to say initially, Mr. Speaker, point number one: the vast, vast, vast majority of parents who receive social assistance benefits are true to having those benefits go to the needs of their children. Let us not confuse ourselves about that. There are a very small percentage.

We have been working over the past number of months with the federal government. The federal government is intransigent on this issue, Mr. Speaker.

Now I want to assure that member that any parents who are under trusteeship today will very likely remain under trusteeship. We will still have that window into the family, and those agencies in our province, including Morris Eagles in Regina, the Salvation Army in my own community and other communities, will still have continuing work with those families.

Mr. Speaker, now I've heard that new party's leader speaking about the need to reform welfare. Mr. Speaker, you know what he's saying these days? He's saying that we should provide incentives to people on welfare to move to independence. Mr. Speaker, I'm glad we have the support of that party and its leader for what we're doing, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Inquiry into Channel Lake

Mr. Gantefoer: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, my question is for the minister responsible for SaskPower. Mr. Minister, yesterday two senior officials presented evidence under oath that suggests the final sale agreement for Channel Lake may have been fraudulent. In fact Ken Christensen and Larry Kram said they have known about this for over a week. But you said you only found out about it yesterday.

What's the matter, Mr. Minister, aren't you in the loop over there at SaskPower? Mr. Minister, what are you going to do about this? Have you gone to your lawyers to find out what your options are? Have you gone to the police to find out what the options are there? What are you doing to protect the interests of Saskatchewan taxpayers?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Mr. Lingenfelter: — Mr. Speaker, I think the real question is which loop you are in, sir, whether you're a Liberal or a Saskatchewan Party or a Tory. There are many people asking about your credibility.

And I want to remind you of something that Mr. Ted Priel said to you and to your committee members and all the committee members this morning. He said, and I quote:

I want to repeat the caution I gave to the committee yesterday. Don't jump to conclusions until you've heard

all of the evidence. In light of new information, it appears that some of the conclusions made yesterday were irresponsible.

Now I'm not sure he was referring to you or to the member from Kindersley or someone in the opposition or in the government benches, but what I would urge you is, if you're going to be part of the inquiry, which I know you are, it's impossible to hold an inquiry and jump to the conclusion of what's happening after hearing parts of the evidence and listening to part of the witnesses.

You're going to have to be patient; you're going to have to do the questioning, as I know you are, and then after you've heard from everyone, hopefully in a calm and reasonable way, come to the conclusion as to whether or not action is needed.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Gantefoer: — Mr. Speaker, Mr. Minister, you now have sufficient evidence to have . . . before you to know that the whole botched Channel Lake deal, agreement, should be declared null and void. Then you could go back to square one. You could start over and maybe this time you could get it right. Sell the Channel Lake properties through a public tender, award the gas supply contract through a public tender, and get a fair price for the people of Saskatchewan, assuming that your officials would read the documents.

Have you learned anything from this, Mr. Speaker. Will you take steps to have this agreement declared null and void?

Hon. Mr. Lingenfelter: — I want to say one thing to the member opposite, that on March 10 in this Assembly I made it clear that mistakes had been made. And we went about to set up the Crown Corporations Committee, when you refused to call Public Accounts, with special powers to do investigations, to subpoena people, to bring them and to bring evidence to that committee. We released a thousand documents.

So I say to you, sir, we have learned a great deal from the mistake that has been made.

But I want to question you, the member from Melfort, on this issue. Have you learned anything from the fact that the party you now belong to created \$15 billion in debt and you and your colleagues have never apologized — never apologized. In fact, Mr. Speaker, I would say this is one of the few times you've seen a rat swimming to a sinking ship, which is what your party is.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Saskatchewan Health Information Network

Mr. Osika: — Mr. Speaker, the NDP government released a report today on the issue of health information. They are going through the motions of getting public input, but privacy is an expensive second thought. The NDP has already spent \$7 million to start developing SHIN (Saskatchewan Health Information Network) in spite of the fact that major, major privacy concerns have yet to be addressed.

The Saskatchewan Medical Association has raised concerns about, and I quote, “the undue haste with which this proposed legislation is being pursued.” SHIN chairperson, John Grossman, indicates in a February 11 letter to the deputy minister of Health that, “the right of the individuals who request non-disclosure of portions of a record will create significant technical challenges for SHIN.”

I’m asking the Minister of Health, Mr. Speaker, must it be developed . . . it must be developed with privacy in mind or you may very well end up starting from scratch after spending millions of taxpayers’ dollars. What is the rush, Mr. Minister?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Mr. Serby: — Mr. Speaker, in this province more than six months ago we indicated to the people of Saskatchewan — and to the Liberal Party — that we would be proceeding with the development of a Saskatchewan health information package, and that it would be complementary to the work that’s being done in Alberta and complementary to the work that’s being done in Manitoba. And we would be ensuring that we would provide to Saskatchewan people the best technology and the best linkages across the province in order to ensure high quality services, particularly, Mr. Speaker, to the people in rural Saskatchewan.

And we made the commitment, Mr. Speaker, that we would bring to this House and Assembly legislation that would do all of the things that the member talks about — ensuring privacy, confidentiality, and respecting the information that’s within the individual’s files. And today we’re in that consultation process and the member’s correct, there have been some issues that have been raised by the Saskatchewan Medical Association and we continue to speak with the Saskatchewan Medical Association and all of the other stakeholders in preparation for bringing that particular piece of legislation to the House, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Osika: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, one of the big problems with health information systems in the United States is that laws drafted by legislators aren’t comprehensive enough to protect all medical records. To give you a few examples, a study found that 35 per cent of Fortune 500 companies reviewed what is supposed to be private information before hiring workers. Direct mail advertisers have obtained access to database information containing names of millions of people with specific health ailments.

Mr. Speaker, to the minister: unless this project is done right, the ultimate casualty will be our health care system and those who depend on the system.

What guarantees can you give the people of Saskatchewan that SHIN will be a fail-safe network? And unless you can do that, how can you justify sinking \$40 million of valuable health care dollars into this program?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Mr. Serby: — Well, Mr. Speaker, I think it’s important

that the member opposite pay some attention to what’s happening across the country — should pay some attention to what’s happening across the country.

Because today, Mr. Speaker, we are in the technical age and as are people across the country — all across the country, Mr. Speaker. And in our province today, Mr. Speaker, we’re spending \$40 million in a very cautious fashion. In a very cautious fashion, Mr. Speaker, in comparison to our friends in Alberta and our friends in Manitoba, who are spending to the tune of \$200 million and \$300 million over precisely the same period of time, we in Saskatchewan are spending \$40 million.

And we’re looking at spending \$40 million, Mr. Speaker, through a very comprehensive process. A very comprehensive process. We’re consulting with the public, health providers, organizations of health professionals, consumer groups, district health boards, Mr. Speaker, health researchers and health advocacy groups.

And we advertised that whole process early in February. And today, Mr. Speaker, we’re consulting in a very, very broad way to ensure that we have the kinds of assurances that protect information and confidentiality of the individuals whose health records we’ll be expected to ensure, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Inquiry into Channel Lake

Mr. Hillson: — It appears that the cost of Channel Lake is still growing. Notes from the Premier’s office filed with the Channel Lake inquiry show that the potential purchase price SaskPower paid for the initial purchase of the Channel Lake assets and Dynex could jump from 25 million to 30 million depending on a court case in Alberta.

What does the Premier know about this court case? What do the Premier’s advisers tell him about the likelihood that the people of Saskatchewan are on the hook for another 5 million bucks to clean up the Channel Lake mess?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Mr. Lingenfelter: — Mr. Speaker, again I say I was not at the committee this morning, but it’s my understanding, with the short time of briefing that I had between when the committee adjourned and when we came into the House, that you were in the process of asking the officials this very question. And in terms of the working of the committee, I would urge you to continue that line of discussion. And again, take the advice of Mr. Priel.

What I really would urge committee members to do is to continue to ask the questions in the committee, but to refrain from jumping to conclusions between the time when you jump up from your chair downstairs until you sit down in here. Because the idea of an inquiry is to listen to all of the evidence and then come to conclusions.

And the member from Battleford is a lawyer and he knows this. Think what would happen in a courtroom if your people on the jury jumped to the conclusion after every witness. It wouldn’t

work — and so you know better. You know better than what you're doing right now. Wait till the next session, ask the questions, but don't jump to conclusions after you get that answer — wait till all the witnesses appear, because you might come to the wrong conclusion.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Hillson: — Mr. Speaker, I'm amused, I'm amused to hear the NDP question my credibility. The Premier was quick enough to use me as a character witness when it served his purposes.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Hillson: — You know the 10-year exclusive supply contract with DEML (Direct Energy Marketing Limited) is a gift from the people of Saskatchewan to Direct Energy. Senior SaskPower officials wrote a year ago that they were not prepared to deal with Lawrence Portigal, yet for the next 10 years we're going to have to do that.

How can the government be any happier than SaskPower officials that we have an ongoing 10-year business relationship with the people who may have secretly removed three pages of the agreement after it was signed and replaced it with three more? How can the government be happy dealing with people who may have hoodwinked us out of \$5 million?

Hon. Mr. Lingenfelter: — I appreciate that the member is now qualifying his radical statements by saying "may" as opposed to coming to conclusion. That's a major step forward for the member opposite. But seriously I say to the member, if we've been using you as character reference, I promise we will refrain from doing that in the future. That's over. It's done.

But on the issue of the 10-year contract, I have said to the member opposite that this was a deal arranged with . . . it was reported to the House. And I say as far as we have been able to determine, the commission paid on that contract, between 1 and 3 per cent, depending on how much gas is being purchased, that in fact it's within the industry standards.

So I say to the member opposite, as it would relate to the other issues — Channel Lake, the severance of Mr. Messer — go to the committee, ask the questions, but I urge you not to jump to conclusions until you listen to all of the evidence and all the witnesses have appeared. Even Mr. Portigal, Mr. Speaker, to his defence — I know he won't need it but the fact is — give the gentleman a chance to come to the committee, answer the questions, because I think that's only fair.

Don't assume guilt until you listen to Mr. Portigal or others.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Workers' Compensation Board Pension Benefits

Ms. Haverstock: — Mr. Speaker, like others who took English literature in high school, I was taught to memorize such lines as, and I quote: "Procrastination is the thief of time." In the case of the wives and husbands killed on the job in Saskatchewan, the provincial government's procrastination to provide pension

benefits is not only the thief of time but the thief of justice as well.

My question for the Minister of Labour is this: will his government be introducing amending legislation this session which will restore pension benefits to those who have been denied them on the grounds of remarriage?

Hon. Mr. Mitchell: — Mr. Speaker, the member asked substantially the same question within the last 10 days. And my answer now is the same as it was then — I'm awaiting a report from the Workers' Compensation Board, and the actuarial experts that are advising the board, as to the implications of the request that has been made of the board of the people that the member speaks of. We are not going to act until we're in possession of that information and it would be irresponsible for us to do so.

What we will do is, when this information is in hand, we will go through the normal procedures in government for deciding an important question of policy like that, and if that requires legislative amendment then that will follow in due course.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Ms. Haverstock: — I did indeed raise some of these questions, not that specific one, a couple of weeks ago. And I went through a number of dates at that time, which started in October 27, 1997, and the most . . . the latest proclamation made by people in Workers' Compensation Board itself was that something would be available by April 14. This is week after week, month after month, that people are in fact being told to wait for something which is not arriving.

I think they have a good feel here that they're being put off, and I simply wish the minister's personal opinion on the following: do you agree, Mr. Minister, that the removal of pensions based on remarriage of these people who lost their spouses through tragic, work-related accidents was unfair and discriminatory?

Hon. Mr. Mitchell: — Mr. Speaker, of course it's not appropriate for ministers to give their individual opinions in situations like this. In due course I'll be making an announcement on behalf of the government, after the government has made a decision.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Ms. Haverstock: — Mr. Minister, I was informed yesterday that the Government of Saskatchewan will be taken to court by the end of this month just as your NDP friends in B.C. (British Columbia) had to go through because they wouldn't respond to this — and they lost. And this is going to occur if there is no clear indication that there is the political will to do right by these widows and widowers.

Seriously, Mr. Minister, are these people who have already endured so much going to have to go to court to see justice? Or are you as the former minister of Justice and the current minister in charge of supporting workers in our province going to give them hope and give them action today?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Mr. Mitchell: — Well I think that the member will realize, Mr. Speaker, that I'm not going to give them action today because I've explained the process by which we will be making a decision with respect to this matter.

One of the wonderful parts of living in a country like Canada of course, is that if you as an individual citizen feel that your rights are being infringed upon, you can go to court, you can sue. That frequently happens, and from time to time the government finds itself as a defendant in those situations.

If that happens in this case, well it happens. But we certainly aren't going to run in fear of threats of the sort that are indicated in the member's question. We'll make our decision in this when we have all the information available and we'll do it as expeditiously as we possibly can.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Mr. Lingenfelter: — I would ask leave to introduce guests.

Leave granted.

INTRODUCTION OF GUESTS

Hon. Mr. Lingenfelter: — Mr. Speaker, not to embarrass Ray, but I did want to introduce Ray Cantelo, who is a friend; grew up, as I understand, in the beautiful province of Prince Edward Island, has worked in various provinces, in Saskatchewan. Recently, about a year ago I guess, Ray moved from Manitoba to the north-east area of the province around Tisdale.

I just wanted to welcome you to the Assembly, Ray.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

INTRODUCTION OF BILLS

Bill No. 29 — The Workers' Compensation Amendment Act, 1998

Hon. Mr. Mitchell: — Mr. Speaker, I move that Bill 29, The Workers' Compensation Amendment Act, 1998 be now introduced and read the first time.

Motion agreed to, the Bill read a first time and ordered to be read a second time at the next sitting.

(1430)

Bill No. 30 — The Tobacco Tax Act, 1998

Hon. Mr. Cline: — Mr. Speaker, I move that Bill No. 30, The Tobacco Tax Act, 1998 be now introduced and read the first time.

Motion agreed to, the Bill read a first time and ordered to be read a second time at the next sitting.

Bill No. 31 — The Enforcement of Judgments Conventions Act/Loi sur les conventions sur l'exécution de jugements

Hon. Mr. Shillington: — Mr. Speaker, I move first reading of Bill No. 31, The Enforcement of Judgments Act. Monsieur le président, je propose le premier lecture du projet de loi numéro 31, Loi sur les conventions sur l'exécution de jugements.

Motion agreed to, the Bill read a first time and ordered to be read a second time at the next sitting.

TABLING OF REPORTS

The Speaker: — Before orders of the day, I table pursuant to The Ombudsman and Children's Advocate Act, the 25th annual report of the Provincial Ombudsman. Tabled.

And I also table pursuant with The Ombudsman and Children's Advocate Act, the third annual report of the Children's Advocate.

ORDERS OF THE DAY

GOVERNMENT MOTIONS

Telecommunications Access for all Canadians

Hon. Mr. Wiens: — Mr. Speaker, I will at the end of my remarks put before the House the following resolution:

That this Assembly urge the federal government, in consultation with the provinces and territories, to create a national, universal service fund in order to sustain universal, affordable telecommunications access for all Canadians, regardless of where they reside.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Mr. Wiens: — Mr. Speaker, affordable, high quality telephone service has contributed immensely to Saskatchewan's growth of the province. In fact our ability to communicate over the telephone with our neighbours, whether they are in Beauval, Fiske, or Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, has helped to knit rural Saskatchewan together.

We have come a long way from a collection of rural telephone systems sending signals over barbwire fences. Our telephone lines now serve as an on-ramp to the information highway, able to transmit data at the speed of light.

In the Climax exchange in the south-west corner of the province for example, average monthly Internet usage exceeds long-distance usage by over 30,000 minutes per month. And in the Beauval exchange in the North, Internet usage is quickly catching up with long-distance usage.

In Saskatchewan, our population is more spread out than in any other province in Canada. At the same time our economy is becoming increasingly globalized and dependent upon technology that uses our telecommunications infrastructure. This makes affordable access to telecommunications more important than ever.

In fact advances in electronic commerce give rural and northern people opportunities to expand and diversify their economic activities, whether it'll allow producers to check commodity

prices, local implement dealers to order inventory, the gas station to verify bank credit card payments, or the rural entrepreneur to access primary business research.

And just when telecommunication services are the most beneficial and the most essential to rural and northern residents, whether it's for running their businesses, connecting to the Internet or for calling 911, their access is now being put at risk. To simply state our challenge, in the past all Saskatchewan residents have had access to affordable, high quality telecommunication services because of an internal cost subsidy.

In the emerging competitive environment this system will no longer work; therefore we must construct the new system that will ensure affordable access for all residents in Saskatchewan.

Let me elaborate. One of the key issues in the area of telecommunications is how to balance the goals of universal, affordable access and high quality services, and at the same time accommodate the federal government's policy of greater competition in the telecommunication sector.

We accept that competition is being introduced; however it is absolutely necessary that we maintain universal, affordable, high quality service for all Saskatchewan people. This is essential to maintaining the social and economic fabric of Canada and its regions.

The vast majority of telephone companies have no mandate and no incentive to serve high cost, rural and remote Saskatchewan. These telecommunication companies will serve rural residents only when there are clear profits to be made.

This leaves companies like SaskTel, who have a social commitment to provide service to all residents, left to compete in the lucrative markets against the big multinationals and somehow try to provide services to rural and northern residents where the costs are the greatest. These are the residents who will be ignored when the multinationals come to Saskatchewan to win a share of the lucrative markets where profits are easily made.

The model that has been used in the past to ensure affordable telephone service to all was cross-subsidization. This allowed companies to use profits from long-distance service to subsidize the cost of maintaining affordable local service for all. And by charging uniform rates for local telephone service, whether you were in Saskatoon or Stony Lake, the high cost of delivering local telephone service to Stony Lake was taken into account in the whole system.

Now with the advent of competition in the long-distance markets and with competition for local service soon to be upon us, this cross-subsidization is no longer tenable. Competitors are either skimming the cream in lucrative markets or prices are being driven down to the point where no subsidy room remains. If cross-subsidies were fully withdrawn from Saskatchewan, rates for rural customers could climb on average five or six times current levels.

Presently in Saskatchewan, a \$59 million subsidy ensures affordable local access. A further \$25 million subsidy ensures that Internet and long-distance service is available. Without

these subsidies, some households could pay over \$100 per month just for basic service.

Just as importantly, in the absence of these subsidies, telephone companies will invest less and less in rural or remote areas which will ultimately deny these residents the full benefits of an advanced telecommunications system. Clearly we have a severe affordability problem in the making for the majority of residents in the rural and remote areas.

More importantly though, this development could endanger the very fabric of Saskatchewan, because you cannot remove the contribution of rural and northern areas without radically changing Saskatchewan.

This affordability problem is the result of the structural change that has been implemented in telecommunications regulation. Having opened the national telecommunications system to competition, it is now incumbent upon the federal government and its agencies to create a regulatory environment that will ensure universal access.

Specifically, we are advocating the creation of a universal service fund. Contributions to such a fund would be based on the total amount of revenue generated from all telecommunications transactions that rely on an integrated, national telephone network. This fund could then be used to ensure that quality services are available to all users at affordable rates.

It is important to be clear on this point. A universal service fund is required to allow any telephone company — not just SaskTel — any telephone company to provide universal, affordable, high quality service to people in rural and northern Saskatchewan.

For those who are concerned that a universal service fund cannot exist in a competitive environment, I believe the United States experience is informative. The United States of America, the supposed champion of competition, was the first to introduce a universal service fund and continues to support its use as a mechanism to ensure both universality and affordability.

In developing their national policies, the Americans have found that a need for a universal service fund flowed automatically out of the introduction of a fully competitive market-place.

In Canada, the creation of such a fund will allow us to sustain universal service in a competitive environment. It would ensure that technology development and infrastructure in rural and northern areas would not lag behind more densely populated areas. And finally, the creation of a universal service fund provides a national solution to a national problem.

In 1996, the federal government stated that it would, and I quote:

Develop a national access strategy . . . to ensure affordable access by all Canadians to essential communications.

It further stated that:

Where market forces cannot provide such services, the strategy will identify the means — regulatory, financial or otherwise — of providing them to people living in rural, remote and northern communities.

We must hold the federal government to its word. The Government of Saskatchewan has already taken steps to make rural and northern people aware of this important issue. Saskatchewan will be making our case before the CRTC (Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission) on June 2 in Prince Albert. We will be joined by many organizations who recognize that this is a critical issue for their constituents and for the future of rural and northern Saskatchewan.

I urge my fellow members to support this resolution. It is vitally important to the people of rural and northern Saskatchewan, and as such it is vitally important to all of Saskatchewan. Mr. Speaker, I therefore move, seconded by the hon. member from Lloydminster:

That this Assembly urge the federal government, in consultation with the provinces and territories, to create a universal service fund in order to sustain universal, affordable telecommunications access for all Canadians regardless of where they reside.

Thank you.

Ms. Stanger: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's with great pleasure that I rise and second this motion today, this government motion, because one of the reasons is that I am finally happy that we are getting to discuss some of the things that are really, really important to my constituents and to rural Saskatchewan — so important that if we do not do something, it won't be a sort of a mystical 5 million, it will be millions of dollars to people in rural Saskatchewan.

And I want to commend the independent member for raising this issue and I want to commend the minister for bringing it as a motion to the Assembly, because I, like I say, I'm finally glad to get up and speak on some of the things that are really important to people that represent rural people. And telephones and communications in Saskatchewan have been vital links that bind us together as a province.

This is a great province that has created infrastructures across it from one end to the other, extensive infrastructure like power lines, telephone lines, health, infrastructure in health, infrastructure in roads — an incredible achievement by the people of this province since 1905.

Saskatchewan is the most rural of all provinces. About 30 per cent of our residents live outside of our urban centres and are widely dispersed over 650,000 square kilometres, Mr. Speaker. It's actually quite amazing.

Extending the telephone network in Saskatchewan has been a challenge. Most of our province is what the CRTC calls a high-cost service area, which means that we have exceptional costs and significant barriers to overcome in providing services. And this has not only been true in telecommunications; it's also been true in many other infrastructures, as I mentioned.

Anyone who lives in rural Saskatchewan knows how diverse our population and how dispersed it is. We have fewer than four households connected to the telecommunications network per kilometre of infrastructure. That's actually quite amazing. This compares with about 10 households in Manitoba and Alberta and 20 in Ontario. You can see how long distances between communities and subscribers makes Saskatchewan a high cost area.

(1445)

Despite these obstacles, Mr. Speaker, Saskatchewan residents today enjoy a world-class telecommunications system. How did we achieve this? Successive governments and people of Saskatchewan and decades of taxpayers believed in the utility concept — universal, affordable service for all regardless of geographic location. And that has been the basis, despite party lines, in Saskatchewan, the basis of building the infrastructures that we all enjoy today.

We created a publicly owned monopoly company that would use cross-subsidies and cross-averaging to deliver services to all at comparable, affordable rates. This means that we use extra revenue gained from long-distance service and low cost areas to subsidize services in high cost, rural and remote areas.

But today we are faced with a set of problems, Mr. Speaker. The telecommunications environment is rapidly changing and methods used in the past to subsidize high cost areas will no longer work in the future. We are here today to talk about how we can preserve our collective approach to universal service in an uncertain future environment and how we can preserve the basic principle of sharing benefits and risks.

We've come a long way from the rural telephone companies which many of our grandfathers and fathers worked on. We have come a long way. We no longer think of communications just as making a telephone call. The convergence of telephones and computers, along with other technologies, has created the information highway.

It is the information highway that enables us to interact with the global economy and worldwide markets. There's some unique examples, Mr. Speaker, of how this is used. I'll give you three of them: the Saskatchewan Indian Federated College's agreement with aboriginal people in Mexico, Guatemala, and Puerto Rico to deliver distance education — this is one way; the Wheat Pool's network within offices and between elevators — another example; credit unions are part of a provincial and national ATM (automated teller machine) machine network. In fact it was the credit unions in Saskatchewan, because of our distances, that first developed the ATM systems, which we can be proud of. We live increasingly in a knowledge-based society and economy.

Telecommunication networks and technology give us the tools to overcome the barriers of time and distance, diversify our economy, and sustain the quality of life in rural Saskatchewan.

The Internet is important to rural and northern Saskatchewan since Internet access is often the on-ramp to the information highway. Internet usage is a good indicator of rural and northern Saskatchewan's interaction with the information

highway.

And, Mr. Speaker, I would just like to quote from a woman that wrote in to our minister when we put the on-line for women's organizations . . . that our minister of the Status of Women has contributed a hundred and forty-four thousand, and we heard some disparaging remarks about this yesterday in the House.

But this is what people are actually saying about this, aboriginal people and other people in the North: "Access . . ." and I quote:

Access to the Internet will revolutionize our organization by making it possible for our members to speak together . . . (and) our concerns — the alienation and victimization of Aboriginal . . . (people) in Saskatchewan. We are scattered across the province, many in isolated pockets, lacking the access to resources other women take for granted. We are most often the victims of poverty, violence and social problems we have been powerless to overcome. We cannot . . . (meet regularly).

I mean this has been the case for years in this province because of our remoteness and on our large distances.

We cannot economically reach out to each other or form concerted efforts to overcome pressing problems because of the physical distances among us . . . The Internet can change that.

So that's just another, isolated example of how important telecommunications is to us. Across the province, schools, libraries, businesses, and individuals are going on-line. In rural Saskatchewan alone we've gone from almost no Internet usage in 1995 to over 100.7 million minutes of Internet usage during an eight-month period in 1997.

And I'll just repeat what the minister has said because I think it bears repeating. We can learn from the U.S. (United States) experience where competition in telecommunications has been a reality for several years. As competition in the United States evolved, they recognized that market forces alone would not ensure that all areas of the country had affordable access to telecommunication services. As a result, they've put in place a universal service subsidy mechanism.

Can you imagine — in that great country of the United States of America. But you know the thing is that they do use their heads. They are not dogmatic. In fact when I think of some of the most wonderful examples of community-based decision making, it has come out of states like Minnesota. This might be a country that is free enterprise, but at least, but at least . . .

An Hon. Member: — Good, left-wing democrats.

Ms. Stanger: — Quit heckling me. My own members are heckling me.

An Hon. Member: — Sorry, I was supporting you.

Ms. Stanger: — Yes, I know. I know.

Anyway I think we can go with the U.S. example, Mr. Speaker. As a result, the U.S. put in a universal service subsidy

mechanism. We believe that such a mechanism could work in Canada to replace traditional subsidies.

A made-in-Canada universal service fund would have these characteristics — something the minister didn't share, but I think is worth noting — all telecommunications companies which earn revenue from interacting with the telephone system would contribute. And that's only reasonable. Why should they use the lines that the taxpayers paid for, millions and millions of dollars, without contributing something. The fund would be explicit and competitively neutral and an independent third party would administer the fund. A good idea I think, Mr. Speaker, and why I'm supporting this motion.

I think that as the . . . I think as the government motion says, we should, as provincial and federal and territorial governments, create a national, universal service fund in order to sustain universal, affordable telecommunications access for all Canadians regardless of where they reside.

And maybe some of the members opposite think this is a joke; I don't think it's a joke. I am sick and tired of this session where we are not discussing the things that concern my rural residents — and this happens to be one of them and I will be supporting this motion, Mr. Speaker. Thank you.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Hillson: — Mr. Speaker, I would like to say at the outset that I think there's a good idea here. I think that the suggestion that has been brought forward certainly has some merit; however I also have to add that the hypocrisy behind it takes my breath away.

Saskatchewan is the only province not to submit to CRTC regulations of our telephone and telecommunications network. The government sought and received that exemption. They are now angling for a further moratorium on accepting national jurisdiction. Now, Mr. Speaker, I don't understand the members of the NDP today saying they want national standards because they have fought tooth and nail against national standards in so many areas of our province's life.

You will recall, you will recall earlier this session, I was embarrassed as a citizen of this province that the Premier was critical of the federal government for taking the initiatives it did in the education of our young people in post-secondary education. He called that an intrusion by our federal government.

I believe in the importance of national standards, Mr. Speaker, and I think that it is important for the federal government to enforce national standards that will force the Government of Saskatchewan to bring up our basic services to that level and join in other provinces, rather than to allow our basic services to crumble to the way they are. So I have no hesitation in saying that national standards are something which I, as a Liberal, and my Liberal colleagues, certainly endorse.

Well you know these people, they criticize national standards; they criticize the federal government; they don't believe in national standards except where it suits their purposes. It's a little bit, Mr. Speaker, I guess like my credibility. You know if

they get themselves in a spot, they may use my testimony to bolster them; the rest of the time they will actually — if you can believe this, Mr. Speaker — they will actually make comments that my credibility is up to question.

But, Mr. Speaker, our roads are crumbling; they say, blame Ottawa. Our health care is closing down, and they say, blame Ottawa.

Well we have no hesitation in saying that national standards are important, and we wonder why these people now arguing for national standards in the telecommunications field want to continue to be the only telecommunications network in Canada that does not subscribe to national standards.

Well it strikes me that our New Democratic friends in this, and in so many other issues, suffer from schizophrenia. They no longer know what they believe. They no longer know what they want. They want national standards one moment, the next moment they don't want national standards — and I'm glad that we do have national standards in areas like post-secondary education and the new National Child Benefit Program.

But I say, our friends opposite, I see an advanced case of schizophrenia. They don't know what they believe; they don't know what they want; they don't know which side of the fence they stand on. And what is more serious, Mr. Speaker, what is more serious, Mr. Speaker, is that with this advancing case of schizophrenia I see over there, I don't know where I can suggest in Saskatchewan they can go for treatment because our treatment facilities are being so seriously cut back as another field of health care.

However, I have no hesitation in saying though, the enforcement of national standards is not something which we as Liberals have a difficulty endorsing. In fact we can do that without hypocrisy, without contradiction. That is a Liberal principle. And while I'm disappointed to say that sometimes the NDP are on board, sometimes they aren't, this time they appear to be on board with saying national standards are important.

We want our people to have the same opportunity here in Saskatchewan as people in Ontario and Alberta and British Columbia have. That is a cornerstone of Liberal philosophy and I guess it is one example . . . The Premier says he wants to give large "L" Liberal government to the people of Saskatchewan. And so if they are now moving towards Liberal philosophy, I'm not going to criticize them for that.

I'm not going to lower myself to pointing out that they are recent converts because it seems to me even a recent convert is better than no converts at all. And in my party of course, I've had experience of converts and they don't always go in the right direction.

But having said that, we as Liberals support the concept of national standards; we support a telecommunications network that offers the people of Saskatchewan the same opportunities as citizens in other provinces have.

I just am still wondering why the NDP came up with this motion today while they still seek to be the only telecommunications network in the province — in the nation —

that is not under national jurisdiction. They still seek to be the only telecommunications network on the continent that is not subject to rate review.

And I don't understand how they can argue that they ought to be the only telecommunications network in the entire continent not under rate review. They want to be special. They want to be separate. They want to be under different rules than everybody else on the continent. And now here they are saying that Ottawa should come up with money so that we can be the same as everybody else.

Well I suggest to my friends opposite that you can't have it both ways. Let's try to be consistent. Let's not half adopt Liberal philosophy and Liberal principle. Let's go the whole way and say yes, as the Premier has said yes, I'm a Liberal. I want to give this province, Liberal government.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

(1500)

Mr. Johnson: — Mr. Speaker, the item that we are discussing is a motion regarding doing something across the country that is fair for everyone. And I see that the member from North Battleford, although not directly saying it, has indicated to this Assembly that the bands — that the Indian bands that he represents in the north end of his constituency — should be paying something in the neighbourhood of a hundred dollars a month for their telephone service. I don't think he really took the time to look at this or even understand what it's all about.

Had the federal government not decided to put the telephone companies under the CRTC so that they could shift the power from the provinces to the federal government, there wouldn't be a need for subsidizing externally to the operations of a company, those phones that provide service to people in rural Saskatchewan. Or any place in rural Canada as a whole.

But when you have a Conservative government followed by a Liberal government that implements policies that allow for companies to come in and high grade the telephone usage and take the money out of those areas where you can provide it at a cheap source and also then cut the funds that were available for those companies to provide the cross-subsidy internally to provide a subsidy for the phones that are expensive and therefore, in the case of a Crown corporation that was owned by the people in a province, and apply the uses for this Crown was to provide service throughout the province at a reasonable cost.

So, Mr. Speaker, when you have a federal government, and at the present time it's a Liberal government, wanting to have the control and the power in order to fill the pockets of somebody who wants to high grade the area and take money out of the system, then that government should also take the responsibility to provide funding so that the service is maintained throughout the rural area.

And as the member from North Battleford stated he was embarrassed, well I think I would be too if I was related in politically to what the federal Liberal government is doing. It is an embarrassment to have anyone in this province stand up and take that particular line — total embarrassment.

Mr. Speaker, it is without any doubt that I'm going to be supporting the resolution, and I ask all of the members of this Assembly to do the same. Thank you very much.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Goohsen: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm happy today to have the opportunity to speak briefly about the proposition being put forward by the government today.

It was of course, Mr. Speaker, a few days back, in fact I guess about a week back, that one of my constituents called my office bringing this matter to my attention. Denise Willows, of course, is the administrator over in the town of Tompkins, and of course this memo had come across her desk. She identified it, being a rural lady herself who lives on a farm, as being a particular problem for herself and of course then transcribed that into a reality that it would be a particular problem for all rural people.

She brought it to our attention — not that we haven't heard of these things before — but of course she piqued our interest because we hadn't really done the mathematics on it that she had. So I give her full credit for bringing this issue to the attention of myself, and through myself to you, and through you to the rest of the Assembly, and we are happy that she has done that.

I want to, after listening to some of the comments made here today though, to add a few words of caution to all members in terms of describing when you go to the CRTC and people like that, of describing Saskatchewan not so much in a partisan way, but as a province that has unique situations.

It came about I think, Mr. Speaker, and some of you will recall who were here through the '80s, that the Saskatchewan Telecommunications Company, SaskTel, was threatened in the middle '80s and late '80s by a similar kind of problem. The government of the day of course was considered to be a right-wing government, and considered to be in favour of privatization of things like SaskTel.

But I recall, rather to my surprise, that when push came to shove at the end of the day that government said, we cannot allow Ottawa and federal ideals to push Saskatchewan around. We cannot allow partisan politics — left-wing politics, right-wing politics — we cannot allow that to destroy a telecommunication system that has to be unique for Saskatchewan to serve Saskatchewan needs. Because in Saskatchewan we are a vast province with vast numbers of miles and miles of miles and miles between everybody else.

And all you can do with that is to deal with it on a Saskatchewan basis and decide which program will best suit the people of Saskatchewan and then, regardless of whether you're accused of supporting a left-wing philosophy or a right-wing philosophy, you support the philosophy that will support the needs of Saskatchewan people. That's what that government had to do.

They bit the bullet and were accused of all of a sudden having become left-wing thinkers, they were called turncoats by the right-wingers, they were called all kinds of things because they

changed their minds about how they had to deal with this issue. And they took what has been described today in the heckling as a left-wing Minnesota idea and they put it to work in Saskatchewan because it's not wrong to have a left-wing idea if it serves the needs of Saskatchewan.

We don't have to call it that. We can call it a common sense approach based on Saskatchewan's reality and I think that's more what it is. Now, Mr. Speaker, having said that we need to support this kind of approach, I was surprised when I heard the Liberal member get up and say that we should take a particular view that coincides with an Ottawa view.

The reality is that people in the government in Ottawa suffer from illusions of grandeur. And I am surprised that the members in the Liberal Party today seem to suffer from that same affliction. They seem to think that they are the only ones that know anything about anything and from Ottawa, they believe that they can dictate to Saskatchewan what is best for us.

The reality is they have no concept of where Saskatchewan even is, let alone what we need to serve our people. And not just being political, that's being reality . . . very real about the realities, Mr. Speaker, of the fact that most people that are in Ottawa at government come from great urban centres where thousands of people live closely together and they have no concept of the vastness or the beauty of a province like Saskatchewan.

And so I'm simply going to say, Mr. Speaker, that I congratulate the government for taking on this issue. I support the minister for his representation to the CRTC on June 2. I hope that he is successful. I don't know if his plan for a universal program with a universal fund is something that he'll be able to sell to anybody in Ottawa or to anybody else in the other provinces. I don't know if it can possibly work. I only know we have to try.

We cannot give up. We cannot allow our phone bills to go so high in Saskatchewan that we end up forcing people either to buy FM radios or to go back to fence-line telephones.

And certainly when you start to talk about constituents like one of mine who said you will be charged \$250 per month just for the basic equipment without ever having made a phone call, if you think about that kind of cost over a year's time, there's absolutely no question that a group of people would very soon say whoa, we can easily put that telephone down the fence line and talk to ourselves and we don't want anything more to do with any kind of telephone schemes. That would be absolutely ridiculous to drive people to that kind of extreme.

Mr. Speaker, I would encourage the members to think in terms of this being a Saskatchewan problem that needs a Saskatchewan solution, and I support the government on this issue.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Toth: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, I'd like to make a few comments in regards to the motion that we have before us as well. And while I recognize what the government

is attempting to do, it would have . . . we would have appreciated as well just a little more notice so we could have at least perused the motion and did a little bit of consultation in regards to having a better understanding.

I hear where the minister is coming from. I've been listening to some of the debate in the Assembly. And as I follow the debate and follow the motion, follow the different suggestions that have come from other party members, I do have some concerns in regards to the motion before us.

However, Mr. Speaker, at the end of the day my colleagues and I will look at it very carefully and no doubt recognizing what the intent of the motion is doing in creating a national universal service fund in order to sustain universal affordable telecommunications across the country.

We're talking here in the province of Saskatchewan for the past number of years no doubt, we have noted the fact that certainly long distance has been utilized to support local phone rates, and I think local subscribers certainly appreciate that. But when we look at Saskatchewan, I think there are some issues that we need to take a look at.

And while the government has moved in the right direction in a number of these issues, and I specifically relate to the recent announcement back in the late fall of the intention to expand telephone exchanges. And then most recently, I know, Mr. Speaker, that in my constituency a number of communities are pleased with some of the initiatives the province has taken in addressing the fact that many small communities have such small phone exchange areas that they're basically paying through the nose as a result of always being on long distance versus having the ability to have the local exchange to work with.

And, Mr. Speaker, when I look at some of the exchanges that have changed, and as I've indicated earlier, I certainly commend SaskTel for recognizing the concern that's been brought forward by many of its customers. I know that the announcement back in December when it was announced that Welwyn, the little village of Welwyn and the surrounding area, would be amalgamated with Moosomin. While people were pleased to see the move to Moosomin, there were a number of concerned individuals who felt that they still had areas where they were on long distance — just a few miles down the road to the community of Rocanville where their children attended school.

And they appreciated the fact that being amalgamated with Moosomin gave them a larger exchange, but it still had some limitations. So the recent announcement that moves Rocanville phone exchange area into the Moosomin area I think is certainly something that's positive. And I certainly commend SaskTel and SaskTel board of directors for looking at the concerns.

My guess, Mr. Speaker, is that when we talk about universal access to phone service or communication services, that SaskTel directors looked at a number of letters, obviously had a number of letters and a number of phone calls from people not only in my area but across the province in regards to phone exchanges, and took a look.

And rather than waiting, have come out with a proposal that is now expanding some of the phone exchange areas, such as the Moosomin exchange where Rocanville moves in with Welwyn and Wapella and allows, certainly as most people in that area will suggest, and would certainly let everyone know about the fact that that's their trading area. Their trading area is in the Moosomin area and most of the calls go to the Moosomin area, and so it's appropriate that they be amalgamated into the Moosomin phone exchange.

Same with Kipling. We saw the community, or the village of Windthorst and the surrounding area being amalgamated with Kipling. Now we have under the new proposal the communities and the exchanges of Glenavon and Kennedy.

There again, Mr. Speaker, while some people on fringe areas and the fringe areas might feel they would have been better served by going to other districts, the fact that they have a larger phone exchange to deal with is certainly something that people welcome, welcome very readily. Especially as we get into the spring activities, and coming from rural Saskatchewan.

And we see, Mr. Speaker, the rural communities and the involvement of talking to businesses such as equipment dealers; and having, in most cases, always being on the phone and paying long-distance bills. Mr. Speaker, this certainly addresses a number of the concerns that have been raised with the residents and constituents of mine in that regard.

Mr. Speaker, some members talked about national standards. And we addressed the concern this afternoon in regards to social services and the fact that the child benefit program is going to be banished by the federal government. And at that time I brought to the attention to the Minister of Social . . . responsible for Social Services that while maybe it was the appropriate means to go in addressing that concern and allowing the federal government to manage this program, in our opinion as we look at some of the concerns that have been raised by individuals, there was a situation where Saskatchewan maybe needed to take control and encourage the federal government to . . . (inaudible) . . . them that opportunity in managing the program because they've already got a mechanism that's in place to deal with abuses.

(1515)

In regards to the province's . . . the Assembly urging the federal government to establish this national universal service fund, I guess it would be appropriate to take some time to really discuss how we would be going about this. And I'm not sure what the Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs or his government has done in how we're going to proceed with this as far as moving this motion forward.

It would seem to me that there should be some further discussion. I would certainly like to have more of an indication as to what we're talking about here, what the responses are, how the government envisions moving forward with this motion, and what its intent is.

And I think giving leadership, certainly from the province of Saskatchewan, is appropriate. But I would . . . before I think we're ready to move on a motion and move forward with this

motion, we would like to have clarification of some of the initiatives and the reasons for the motion we have before us.

Mr. Speaker, our concern is . . . and I believe the Liberal colleague from North Battleford raised the concern . . . (inaudible) . . . fact that we're sending it, would ask the federal government . . . Our concern is, and I reiterate some of the comments made by the member from Maple Creek, I'm not exactly sure if the federal government really cares or is really that concerned.

I think we need to speak with firmer language. And whether it's a federal government issue or whether it's an issue that we as a province can certainly really push forward or move forward or initiate, it is something that I think we need to take a careful and more close look at, especially in view of the fact that in rural Saskatchewan there are such large distances between communities, and communication is such a vital link for so many individuals.

Mr. Speaker, in general I certainly can agree with the motion that is established before me today and brought before this Assembly. I would like to . . . in fact, Mr. Speaker, before I'm prepared to move forward, I would like to have some more clarification in regards to some of the items before us.

And with that in mind, Mr. Speaker, I'm prepared to take my seat and give government members other opportunities to address the question. Or at this time, ask the government if we could move to an adjournment and bring it forward and respond in that regard.

Mr. Speaker, I would at this time then move to adjourn debate.

The division bells rang from 3:19 p.m. until 3:29 p.m.

Motion negatived on the following recorded division.

Yeas — 9

Bjornerud	Toth	D'Autremont
Draude	Gantefoer	Heppner
Osika	Hillson	McLane

Nays — 25

Van Mulligen	Wiens	Shillington
Tchorzewski	Johnson	Goulet
Lautermilch	Kowalsky	Calvert
Teichrob	Bradley	Koenker
Trew	Lorje	Sonntag
Cline	Serby	Hamilton
Stanger	Jess	Ward
Langford	Murrell	Thomson
Goohsen		

Hon. Mr. Shillington: — Thank you. I hadn't planned to enter into this debate, but by force of circumstances I find myself so doing.

It is most unusual to deny an adjournment to the opposition for a motion on the first day, particularly when they have not been given any notice of it. This is most unusual. And I make these

comments by way of an apology.

We had, I am told — I don't attend House leaders these days because I am otherwise occupied in the Crown Corporations Committee — but I am told that our House leaders committee instructed that both opposition parties be informed of this, and somehow the instructions weren't carried out. So I apologize for whatever may have happened.

We want to pass this today, Mr. Speaker, because we have meetings lined up, some key meetings with federal ministers. And if this is not passed, then they won't be able to take this in hand to meet the federal ministers, and I think they want this in their pockets. And that's really why we're denying the adjournment.

And that is why, all the more reason why we should have given notice — we should have given notice anyway, given its importance but particularly since we were going . . . needed it passed today.

I just want to make a very brief comment on the subject matter itself. The idea was first floated when I was minister in charge of communications, about four years ago actually. We floated this before the CRTC. I appeared as an intervener in a hearing in Winnipeg. And we floated this idea and it's just now — the mills of the gods do indeed grind slowly — it's just now being seriously proposed by the CRTC.

I think members are aware of the basic background to this. We have heretofore subsidized rural service and northern service with long distance. And we have . . . and the subsidy has been fairly marketed. I think we were charging rural people something like 70 per cent, around 70 per cent of the cost of their service. And with respect to northern people it was much . . . it was only a fraction of the cost.

In an era of competition we can no longer, Mr. Speaker, use long-distance profits to subsidize local service, because long distance is not competitive and the margins are razor thin. And we really do fear the effect that a move to full competition will have on rural people and northern people.

I can tell you, Mr. Speaker, that I practised law for some 10 years and I had a branch office in Coronach. And members may or may not know that Coronach is about 8 miles from the Montana border. I had some clients who were American, because they owned land in Canada. And so I had some American clients. And they would tell me their phone bills.

At a time when the people of Coronach, the farmers in Coronach would pay 15, \$20 for basic service, folks in Montana would pay 80, \$90 for service which — I'm sure the folks in Montana would not be insulted if I said, because they used to tell me that — the service was much, much poorer than what we got in Canada. They really used to marvel at our ability to provide telephone service to Saskatchewan farmers for the cost we did. It was a fraction of what they were paying.

And that's what we have to go to if, if competition . . . we proceed with competition without some limits. And so what we proposed . . . what was proposed, and what I think the CRTC is proposing, is that everyone divvy up a very small sum for urban

users. It would be an unnoticeably small sum. That then would be available to anyone who wants to provide service to rural and northern areas. I think it's unlikely that anyone but the Stentor telephone companies will actually provide the service. I think it's most unlikely anyone else would be interested, but the option's open to them.

The idea was borrowed . . . this is not a . . . I want to assure the member from Maple Creek that this is not a left-wing idea which we ought to flee from. We borrowed the idea straight from the U.S. U.S. have in fact such a system that they use to subsidize rural service. They don't have northern service, they have rural service. I think the point that the minister in moving it, I'm not sure if he mentioned this but one thing that is . . . one problem with the U.S. system is the subsidy isn't high enough. And the good folks in Montana don't get enough money and so they get poor service at an exorbitant cost.

What we are trying to do is to ensure that the subsidy is enough that rural people will basically get the same service at approximately the cost they do now. They'll get as good a service as they do in urban areas so that's why we're moving the motion. And again I apologize for the haste, but in the best run governments things don't always go smoothly, so we should have notified them.

That however, Mr. Speaker, is why we denied adjournment. That's why we feel so strongly about the motion and we want our members of our Executive Council to go with this motion in their hip pockets when they deal with the federal ministers. Thank you very much.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Bjornerud: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, I'm somewhat disappointed by the members opposite today for not giving us a little more forewarning on what we're talking about here. At first glance from what I see today it's maybe not all that bad of an idea, but I'm somewhat concerned that what all goes along with what we're talking about today, and as I believe the minister has mentioned here, but I think we would need a little more time to take a look at this.

For an example, that I believe they want to be exempt within SaskTel of the CRTC being over SaskTel, where they are over every other telecommunications company in Canada. And I have a problem with that. I think the long-distance market has proven that competition brings out the best in everything and I think our long-distance rates have shown that. We saw a dramatic decrease in our long-distance rates in this province after competition having come in.

Now I understand what the minister's talking about when we come to the local rates because I'm from a rural constituency and I have very many of the same concerns I believe the minister does. I guess where my concern is here is what other things are tied to what we're talking about today.

I think I would feel much more relaxed if I knew if we're specifically talking about one thing, and that's a subsidy by all the companies in the telephone industry that are going to take part, putting into a pool. My own personal view — and we haven't talked about this, Mr. Speaker, as a group because we

haven't been given enough forewarning of what's going on — I don't think I would have a problem with that.

Where I have the problem with the meetings that the government members are going to have tomorrow with the federal government is what else is going to be tied to this? And I would hate to have us today come along and say yes, we as a Saskatchewan Party agree what the minister's put forward today, find out tomorrow that part and parcel of what we're dealing with tomorrow is far more extensive than what we've actually been led to believe today.

I would have really liked to have seen this in paper form, I guess for lack of a better word, Mr. Speaker, so that we saw all of the ramifications of what may be discussed tomorrow. As I've said before, Mr. Speaker, competition to me, and I believe to our whole party here, is probably the spice of life and we've saw what it has done for all over the province in long-distance rates.

The minister I believe has insinuated that our local rates will go up, and I'm inclined to agree with him that they have to go up if our long-distance rates come down. I guess where we disagree, probably on the extent of that, should all the companies being involved in the program here have to put money into a pool? Actually I don't think I can see anything wrong with that concept. I feel that if they're going to take the good part of the system, then I agree — they should also be expected to pay for the part that maybe is not so lucrative for them.

I do like to add though, Mr. Speaker, that our SaskTel rates have increased somewhat dramatically in the last while and I believe the excuse used is for larger regional telephone exchanges, which I don't think . . . very few have seen the benefit of. In phase 2 there's a few more seeing that benefit but we're all being charged, I believe it's another \$4 from February on, another \$2 next February, Mr. Speaker, with the warning that there'll be another dollar added on for 911 which we also don't have at this point.

So I guess it would be hard for the members opposite to say that we all are crying wolf here when really we've saw a lot of these things happen. The increased revenue for SaskTel, if you add up the \$4 now, the \$2 next February, the \$1 for 911, works out to in excess of \$50 million a year for SaskTel, and the benefits that the public, especially out there in rural Saskatchewan have seen, are minimal at best. Very few telephone exchanges have changed.

In my area I believe in phase 2 we have the town of Bredenburg included with the town of Saltcoats, which might and a lot of . . . on average mean about a dollar a month. So what my ratepayers out there and telephone users are actually going to have to pay in the end, is about another \$6 a month that they're not benefiting from unless phase 3 includes a lot bigger areas than we've saw now.

I also have a bit of a problem, Mr. Speaker, and this is part and parcel of what we're talking about in the CRTC's exemption for Saskatchewan, is that SaskTel is in the process of trying to get into the cable business in Saskatchewan. Where I have a problem with this, Mr. Speaker, is that what I believe is happening is SaskTel is going to end up competing with our

small cable companies with their own money — because that's what it amounts to — because the people that own these cable companies and work there are also shareholders in SaskTel. And there is no way on earth these little companies can compete in the cable business with someone the size of SaskTel if SaskTel decides to squeeze them out.

So, Mr. Speaker, I have a number of concerns. I feel that probably SaskTel in the long run, I think would be better off and we would be better off if they had to play by the same rules as everyone else in the province. As I have said, Mr. Speaker, I would really like for us to have a lot more time to have looked at what we're talking about today and I'm not sure really we can go along with this at this point until we see exactly what we're talking about and this isn't snuck right up on us.

I do believe, Mr. Speaker, as I think everyone in our party here has talked about, we're not in for running right out and privatizing the Crowns, but, Mr. Speaker, I think things like this has to be looked at when we see what competition does and brings it in. The kind of fees for service that have happened within long distance and the kind of things that we're looking at in the local rates, I think that probably we are on the same wavelength as what the minister is talking about today but are somewhat worried of what we're getting ourselves into.

Mr. Speaker, there's a number of questions I think we have on this issue but I don't think we're going to be able to, in this format and forum be able to, you know, Mr. Speaker, be able to get the answers we need to make the decision that the minister wants.

Mr. Speaker, there's a number of areas that just keeps going on and on where our SaskTel rates have climbed and climbed and climbed. 911 is a prime example, I think, that the Premier announced at the SARM, and I don't believe it went over real well.

(1545)

911, yes it's important to this province, but I've . . . my honest feeling, Mr. Speaker, is that unless it's an enhanced 911 system we really gain very little out there. We see . . . I like to use the example of my Kamsack area where you could be a block from the RCMP but you have to phone Regina to get RCMP service, which is totally ridiculous, because the time it takes to have a person on the other end answer the phone here, get a hold of the Kamsack RCMP, and get someone to respond to the complaint is really . . . slows down the process.

So I guess what I'm saying, that dollar I'm not sure is well spent unless we put enough time into the issue to have someone on the other end of the line that is very well versed on what they were doing and can help you through each situation. So, Mr. Speaker, we have a number of concerns for what is going on here.

Mr. Speaker, you know that SaskTel is involved in a number of communication systems around the world. And I guess what we are talking about today and probably in a long way around comes into that, with the amount of dollars that we are losing in such things as the NST deal, and possibly some of the things we're into now like New Zealand and other areas over there, the

\$16 million that we really, for lack of a better word, threw away of taxpayers money there would have gone a long way to help lower our local rates.

And it seems that that's what the minister is asking us today, is to deal with these, the increase in the local rates out there and asking for every company involved to put their share in. And I guess our problem being, is I don't really, honestly believe we really have enough information today to make an intelligent decision, Mr. Speaker, and it's regrettable. Because I think maybe we could have supported the minister on this one and may have if we had all the information.

So with that, Mr. Speaker, I will . . . I think I voiced my concerns and I will take my seat.

Mr. Heppner: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I believe this is an issue that we need to address and we need to look at very closely. As people who've almost all of us have grown up in rural Saskatchewan, some of us remember the old phone wires still hanging on poles; remember the old crank phone that was out there and was probably called a crank phone for two reasons, partly because it was cranky.

And so we remember some of those old situations where the small districts went ahead and put their own phones in and they put their own poles in and there wasn't any SaskTel to do it. It was just a group of farmers getting together and ensuring that they had that service. And I remember those days quite well. And I remember the telephone coming into my home when I was a little tyke and being quite impressed with it.

And I guess one of the things that came up as soon as the phone system came in, I remember the group coming down to our home and one of the first questions my father asked was, what's going to be the cost on that. And I think here we are some many decades later and we were discussing the same sort of thing again — what cost is it, how much good is it going to do?

I think the concept that's been presented here is probably a very valid concept. Because if we find that our telephone rates in rural Saskatchewan are going to go up five and ten times, it's an item that our rural population just can't bear. Whether we're talking about people living on acreages and being wage-earners and having other expenses that acreages already provide — whether it's the sewer and water and the transportation they have to do to get to their jobs — or we're talking about people who are actively involved in farming, it's a cost that just can't be hiked too much more.

And, Mr. Speaker, we've seen in the past year or two how SaskTel has hiked many of those particular costs in the past, and that hiking of costs has caused a great concern among our farmer friends.

And I recall last fall going on to the individual that rents my land, and one of the things we just talked about at that particular time happened to be the cost of his particular phone bill and how it had gone up. Basically in his perception it had gone up leaps and bounds.

And I think when we deal with this long-distance issue and the rural rates, and those two are always tied very close together,

we're going to have to look at that closely. And I think particularly in my area where we've had two or three groups that have in the past worked with SaskTel to try and get some of the districts changed, we've seen a veritable intransigence on the part of the telephone company. They didn't listen. None of the advice that was given was taken. And I think that the people in my district are very frustrated with what's going on.

And so we do need more time to deal with this. And to that end, Mr. Speaker, I make a motion. I move:

That the motion be amended by adding the following to the end of the motion:

And that the matter be referred to the Standing Committee on Communication for consideration and report.

Mr. Kowalsky: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and I thank the member opposite for the amendment. In discussions with the members opposite they have conveyed to us that they would like another day at least to work on this motion, so we propose that our members defeat the motion in order that we can move an adjournment motion and allow the opposition time to look at this and bring it back up on the order paper tomorrow. And we propose that we will adjourn the motion immediately after voting this motion.

Amendment negatived.

Mr. Kowalsky: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I move that debate on the motion now be adjourned.

The Speaker: — I am afraid that the hon. member is not eligible to enter into debate. The hon. member has . . . and therefore I cannot recognize him.

Hon. Mr. Calvert: — Mr. Speaker, I move that debate on the motion now be adjourned.

Debate adjourned.

GOVERNMENT ORDERS

ADJOURNED DEBATES

SECOND READINGS

Bill No. 13

The Assembly resumed the adjourned debate on the proposed motion by the Hon. Mr. Sonntag that **Bill No. 13 — The Alcohol and Gaming Regulation Amendment Act, 1998** be now read a second time.

Mr. Heppner: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I want to take a few minutes today to add to some of the comments made by the member from Saltcoats the other day, and to reiterate some of the points he made because I think they were very important.

To begin with, let me say that we are supportive of the changes that are proposed in this legislation for the most part. As the member from Saltcoats stated a few days ago, we have to find the proper regulations for bars and lounges. Obviously we can't

let the sale or consumption of alcohol go totally unregulated; but as well we have to make sure that the rules and regulations we do have in place are not so onerous, so cumbersome, that it's difficult for an owner to make a go of their own business, and it's a tough business to succeed with in the first place.

Under the current rules, a simple infraction of the rules may result in the closure of the bar for a period of time. Yes, this harms a bar owner who breaks the rules financially, but it also hurts those people, all of them, who work there to make a living. We are supportive of the general move to fine bar owners for infractions of the rules instead of closing the venues; although there may be times, Mr. Speaker, when closure is the only option. If rules are broken over and over again the option of closure should still be at the disposal of the Liquor Authority. I'll get to this in a few minutes, but I want to make a few other comments briefly.

While some of these comments aren't tied directly to the Bill that's before us today, nonetheless I think they're important because whenever we are talking about liquor, and particularly gaming, I think we should take time to remind the members opposite of their track record since 1991. Mr. Speaker, this is a government that's become seriously addicted — very seriously addicted — to the revenue they collect from gaming. While taxes and levies and profits from liquor sales have been around for as long as I have, and that's a long time, gaming is new — at least the level of gaming we've seen in this province since 1991.

The revenues collected, Mr. Speaker, by the government prior to this massive expansion of gambling was negligible. Now however, the NDP's gambling program has grown to the point where the government is now absolutely dependent on it. They wouldn't know what to do with their budget if they didn't have those dollars coming in.

The government's yearly take on gambling now stands at 130 million, Mr. Speaker. That's 130 million taken out of pockets that usually couldn't afford it. And the vast majority of this comes from VLTs. Today in Saskatchewan we have around 3,600 video lottery terminals — VLTs. We also have Casino Regina and the four Indian-run casinos throughout the province.

Five years ago — and those figures are exact, for the people opposite who seemed rather astounded by that — five years ago we had none of this. I suppose some may consider this progress, but I know a great many people who don't, and who wouldn't consider that progress.

While the VLT has been a huge financial peach for the government opposite — and they've picked it many a time — this has simply not been the case for the communities where VLTs are located. We acknowledge for the bar owners themselves, VLTs have brought some extra revenue and some new customers. This has aided in the ongoing struggle for many of these bars, particularly in smaller communities, to keep the doors open. So that would be opposite.

Meanwhile the members on the other side seem to say that's worth all the hardships that that causes to the families. I suggest they should meet with some of those families and weigh those two situations and see where they ought to be at, if they have

any smidgen of a social conscience, and I doubt that.

However, what I don't consider positive has been the effect on the rest of the community. And this is where the people need to listen — the rest of the community. When you take \$10 million out of individual communities in this province you are doing harm. There's no doubt about it. There's no question on that. The members opposite may not want to believe it because it would affect their ability to manage — or mismanage, as they are doing presently.

To make matters worse, the NDP even broke their promise to return some of this money to the communities. And everyone out there in Saskatchewan is very aware of the promises that were made. And this government suddenly said, well if you can't come to the exact conclusion how to do it, you'll get nothing. Doesn't seem like the kind of government that's there that should be taking care of people.

This has made a huge difference to many small centres in the province. But the members opposite again don't care. We're not just talking about money that has been removed directly from the community, Mr. Speaker, we're also talking about the effect of the government's gambling policies on local fund-raisers for charities and other for-profit organizations and other organizations that are not for profit, such as minor sports, youth organizations and those sorts of things. Those have all experienced, Mr. Speaker, a very serious shortfall in funding because of the money that's been taken out to fund this government's plan.

Meanwhile those programs in our communities throughout this province are suffering — programs that provide opportunities for our youth, for our seniors, for everyone across the spectrum. In the last five years many of these organizations have seen their local fund-raising efforts dry up. Money that was once raised at community bingos, are now be thrown in large measure into the VLTs down the street, and this government takes a big piece of that.

And the local governments are in no position to aid these not-for-profit community organizations, because the municipalities themselves are stretched to the limit because of the serious cut-backs inflicted by the members opposite as the NDP continues its program of downloading.

So, Mr. Speaker, while we are most definitely in need of regulation in the area of liquor and gaming, perhaps the government should stand back and think whether it should control its own thirst for revenues garnered by liquor revenues, and especially gaming revenues. They should take responsibility, Mr. Speaker, for the damage they've caused in communities across Saskatchewan in many different forms. At the very least they could acknowledge the damage that's been done, but I won't hold my breath on that one, Mr. Speaker.

At any rate I think that for the most part we can support this piece of legislation with a few reservations. The maximum fine under this Bill that can be levelled against a bar owner for breaking the rules is \$10,000. However the legislation doesn't set out what the fines are for the various infractions and that's a rather scary situation for everyone to get into, not to know which infraction is going to have a particular fine levied against

it. The legislation doesn't set that out.

Over in Alberta, I understand that the maximum fine is much larger. It happens to be \$100,000. However at the same time, the province has a definite schedule of fines laid out so that people know exactly what the fines are for the different infractions. This government has chosen not to do that and leaving it all up to guesswork. I think we would like to see a similar schedule laid out in detail here as well, Mr. Speaker. Perhaps that's going to be done in the regulations, and as so much else is done in regulations I guess we wouldn't be surprised when that happens.

As well, the three-year statute of limitations for liquor consumption, to take action against an establishment for infractions, seems to me to be a little excessive. Many more serious crimes in Saskatchewan don't have a statute of limitations of that length of time, so we want to ask the minister why that happens to be in place. It seems to me just to be a heavy-handed tool that the Liquor Commission has to hang over the heads of business people. Some clarification is definitely needed in those regards.

(1600)

But like I said, Mr. Speaker, I think we're supportive of the general thrust of this Bill and I think most of our concerns and questions can be addressed in a Committee of the Whole when we get to that stage.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Motion agreed to, the Bill read a second time and referred to a Committee of the Whole at the next sitting.

Bill No. 22

The Assembly resumed the adjourned debate on the proposed motion by the Hon. Mr. Nilson that **Bill No. 22 — The Electronic Filing of Information Act** be now read a second time.

Mr. Heppner: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Well, Mr. Speaker, as all members of this House know, we're living in an age where technology has become so integral in our lives and it seems to be changing and advancing every year. That may be one exception too; that may be the year 2000 when everything may just come to a sudden halt for a period of time.

But, Mr. Speaker, when we sit back and think about the technological advances we've seen in just this last decade, it's rather mind-boggling. How many people had access to a personal computer a decade ago, had the access, and now we find many homes have them there and have some very advanced ones as well.

Ten or fifteen years ago, how many members here today had not even used a fax machine or knew what a modem was? And when we look at the situation happening throughout the province, I guess we need that all over. How many of us had heard of the Internet or e-mail five years ago?

When you just sit back and think about it, the changes we have

all seen in our relatively short lifetime — it's amazing. Now for some, it may also be a little scary. And it's interesting that as I'm talking about this, I seem to be hearing something that sounds electronic running around the Chamber. I think most members here would agree that most of the time our children or grandchildren are far more up on the computer age than we are, and they feel so at home with it.

I guess it's hard to teach an old dog new tricks, and there's no older dog than this government. It's no secret, Mr. Speaker, that governments usually take a little bit longer to catch up with the rest of the world when it comes to technology. The old ways of doing things die hard in an entrenched bureaucracy. But eventually change must come. Out with the Underwood and in with Windows 95 or 98, or wherever we are as we happen to be speaking today.

The government cannot be immune, Mr. Speaker, to the changes that are taking place. So many more things are being done with computers today than even two years ago. Fortunately for us, I believe most things that they are doing in our society are to our benefit. But we've also seen very recently on one of the television programs where a lot of the electronic information that's out there has been used to duplicate credit cards and other cards that give access to bank accounts, and so that area is becoming much more frightening.

The Government of Saskatchewan took a step not too long ago when its web site was set up. It was the web site of the legislature. While not many of us have heard of a web site even that recently, the Internet has become an important tool for conveying information to people, Mr. Speaker. We're living in an age of instant access to informal and material things. And these web sites are a must today not just a novelty.

I was glad to hear the Provincial Secretary state in his estimates on Friday that the government's web site will be expanded and improved. That's absolutely necessary because compared to the types of information that's available on other government web sites, our page is not very impressive or very helpful especially when we consider ourselves a province that relies heavily on tourism. It needs to be a top-class affair.

So when governments do tend to move slowly in this area, Mr. Speaker, they're forced to move. And the government appears to be moving ahead with the times with this Bill, Bill 22. We're moving very quickly to a paperless society for the most part, and I can't think of a bigger user of paper than government — any government.

It would begin to move even a tiny portion of government business away from paper hard copies and into the electronic world, this will save an untold number of trees and hopefully a few bucks in the process as well. Of course, as with any change made by government, this one comes accompanied with a pilot project. Like I say, Mr. Speaker, things never move quickly in the world of government.

On the whole though, we support this legislation. The Government of Saskatchewan cannot afford to fall behind the people of the province in terms of technology, the exchange of information. According to the minister in his brief remarks, these changes are being made as a result of a growing demand

by the public to be allowed to send pertinent information to the government agencies through electronic means.

This should be as no surprise to anyone because they do that with their business associates across the world. Even in our office, the proportion of e-mails we receive compared to the number of traditional letters has shifted dramatically. It only stands to reason, Mr. Speaker, then that people would also be interested in sending official information as far as registrations, applications, and other forms to the government electronically as well. And this will only increase in the coming years.

I guess one of my concerns in all this is that we're only making these changes now, a third way into 1998. It seems to me private organizations have been on this track a lot longer. And, Mr. Speaker, from the looks of the Bill and the minister's statements from the other day, we're still quite a way from a day when all departments of government accept electronically filed information from the citizens of this province.

Obviously it's got to be a transitional process since not everyone in the province has the ability to file electronically so the traditional way of doing things can't be swept aside immediately. But I would think the government would be further along in the process than they appear to be from this particular piece of legislation.

Another area of concern I have is that everything we see in this Bill regards the people who need to send information to the government. We haven't heard much at all about the paper that the government sends out on a daily basis. I do acknowledge that it does appear that some progress has been made in this area — even right here in this building, Mr. Speaker. With the legislative home page we are, I hope, saving a lot of paper with the declining need for hard copies of sessional papers, documents, things such as *Hansard* and others.

Yet right here in this House we continue to see a massive quantity of paper handed out on a daily basis. I can only imagine the paper usage by the entire government on a daily situation. So I think it's incumbent on the government to tell us and to tell the people of Saskatchewan its plans for reducing this waste. As I say, right now we're in a transitional phase in many ways.

More and more is available electronically and becomes available electronically every single day. Yet the traditional paper copies are handed out as we get our heads around new ways of doing things. But I think we have to recognize as well that there are many people in this province who are way ahead of us on this account.

So while it appears progress is being made with this Bill in terms of accepting current technologies, I think we're going to need some assurances from the minister that the government is indeed doing all it can in making use of the technology of the late 1990s as it possibly can and should. The question is: how long is it going to take to get all the departments on line? Are we talking months or are we talking years?

I think if the government is trying to keep up this is going to have to be a fairly quick process, Mr. Speaker, and of course it's going to have to be an ongoing process as well.

Will the government implement an ongoing plan for adapting new technologies as far as collecting information is concerned? What exactly are we talking about in terms of what kind of information the government is considering for this? In the legislation there is reference to certified documents. What is going to be the exact procedure for this type of important information?

And of course, old questions remain as well, Mr. Speaker. In committee we're going to be asking the minister for some cost breakdowns for this change-over. Will government departments need massive infusions of cash to update software or to get up and running as far as electronic filing is concerned?

Is the current computer equipment that the government departments are using adequate and how long will it be adequate? I do recognize that this is a very hard question to answer given the technology is changing so quickly, but I think it has to be considered.

There is also the question of verification of documents and the question of privacy. Who will have access to the electronic files? What safeguards will be in place to ensure that information is seen only by those who should be seeing it?

The minister did not speak to these issues in great deal in his brief remarks on Friday, and the legislation is pretty sketchy as well. And there are still more questions about the Bill that we'll need to have answered. But overall this legislation is a small step in the right direction as the government moves further into the computer age.

Once again, it's important that this government and the new government which will take over in just a year keeps these issues in mind. Governments cannot remain idle forever in this changing world, although the members opposite are going out of their way to disprove this. But that idleness will pay off and you'll have lots of time to be idle soon.

Overall I think we'll be able to support this legislation once the minister has answered the question we have posed to our satisfaction. But let me reiterate. It has got to be only the first step in getting this government fully in touch with the information age and to aid that process. I see no reason to hold up this Bill any longer. We are willing to proceed to Committee of the Whole and have our various questions and concerns dealt with at that time.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Motion agreed to, the Bill read a second time and referred to a Committee of the Whole at the next sitting.

(1615)

COMMITTEE OF THE WHOLE

Bill No. 18 — The Pharmacy Amendment Act, 1998

The Deputy Chair: — As we begin, I'll invite the minister to introduce his official.

Hon. Mr. Serby: — Mr. Chair, I have with me today Mr. Drew Johnston, who is the senior health professional analyst with the

Department of Health.

Clause 1

Mr. Toth: — Thank you, Mr. Deputy Chair. As I note from some of the opening comments made by the minister a few days ago when this piece of legislation was brought before the Assembly — and the reasons for it — the minister did mention that a new pharmacy Act was passed in 1996, passed to better regulate pharmacists and retail pharmacies in Saskatchewan. I find it interesting that we have another piece of legislation before us.

And I guess the reason being as it, as the minister indicated, became apparent that the Saskatchewan Pharmaceutical Association and Saskatchewan Health, that there was deficiency in the original Act, a deficiency. While The Pharmacy Act allowed for drug schedules to be established in regulations, it did not allow for changes to those schedules to be made automatically.

And, Mr. Minister, maybe you could just clarify a little bit what was meant by that statement and why the current Act is before us at this time, and the areas that it's going to specifically address.

Hon. Mr. Serby: — Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. As the member rightly identifies that when the Act was proclaimed in 1996, there was a section of the Act that needed some further enrichment that was overlooked, I would suspect. And what we want to do today as the member's identified, is to provide the automatic capture, through regulation, of the changes that are made to federal regulations.

And so what will happen with this minor amendment that we're asking here for approval on is that it will ensure that it will immediately reflect any changes that are made of course in the federal narcotics and food and drug regulations, and that the Saskatchewan Pharmaceutical Association will no longer need to file the numerous bylaw amendments that will be able to better assign drugs to the most appropriate schedules.

In our bringing forward of the Act in 1996, this particular section was, I might say, overlooked or omitted. We're the only province in Canada that doesn't have this particular piece in place, and this amendment would allow for this to occur automatically.

Mr. Toth: — Now when you're talking of automatically allowing drugs to be added or changed on the drug schedule, exactly what to you mean, Mr. Minister? Is that drugs coming on stream as new drugs and being added into the pharmaceutical area where they'd be dispersed to the public? Or what are we specifically talking about?

And also, Mr. Minister, if the changes weren't addressed in this piece of legislation, what would that mean to the pharmaceutical association in the province of Saskatchewan?

Hon. Mr. Serby: — Well if we didn't approve the amendment, every time that there was a new drug that would be approved, we'd have to send it over to Justice and then it would have to be approved on that process.

And what this of course . . . when you ask the question about what are the drug schedules, I can provide for you a sheet that covers that off. There are three schedules — prescription drugs, non-prescription restricted access drugs to pharmacies only, and then of course the third schedule, which we can provide for you, were the non-prescription pharmacy only.

So I can provide that for you. I could read it into the record; it would probably be easier for me to just send it over to you and have you review it.

Mr. Toth: — Thank you, Mr. Minister. So, Mr. Minister, in some ways this is addressing some areas of red tape if you will, some extra paperwork in time that would be required if the changes to the legislation weren't brought forward at this time. Is that what you're suggesting?

Hon. Mr. Serby: — That's correct. It eliminates the process of the red tape as you identified. That's correct.

Mr. Toth: — Mr. Minister, as well, could you define automatic? Obviously it would seem when we're talking about reviewing drugs at some point, and you talk about the automatic . . . automatically allows for changes, what specifically does that mean? Is there still a process that drugs go through or discussion goes through before drugs are changed or added on the schedule?

Hon. Mr. Serby: — Once the new drug is approved by the federal department of the narcotic and food drug regulations what happens is that it would automatically then appear on our schedule, is what the term "automatic" means, as opposed to going through the process that I've identified earlier.

Mr. Toth: — In your opening . . . Actually I guess it was the Government House Leader that had spoken to this at the time, but in regards to the comments that were made in second reading, it was mentioned in the second reading speech that the Saskatchewan Pharmaceutical Association would have to pass bylaw amendments as federal drug law is changed. And I'm wondering, Mr. Minister, if you could just outline how this procedure works in regarding bylaw amendments.

Hon. Mr. Serby: — Okay. Every time that there would be a change, what would happen is that the pharmaceutical association would have to register those changes, of course, with the two schedules, under the drug prescription and under the non-prescription restricted access process, and that would be filed with the Corporations branch.

Mr. Toth: — Under the changes to the current Act does this alter any of the safety that the public might be looking for as far as drug administration and adding or deleting or changing drugs on the schedules and the drugs that may be coming, added into the pharmaceutical Act, Mr. Speaker, or Mr. Minister?

Hon. Mr. Serby: — Really what it is it just provides for a better administrative process and ensures that the drug is immediately registered onto the schedule, is really what it does.

Mr. Toth: — I note, Mr. Minister, as well that the original Act was passed in 1996, and the fact that we're in 1998 I'm wondering exactly, were you aware of the fact that there was

some deficiencies even back last spring? And if so, could we have at that time dealt with those deficiencies? Or were you just not prepared at that time to . . . with legislation to bring forward to address that concern.

And that's what I'm wondering, is why it's taken a couple of years to address what seems to be a fairly minor change. And in the intervening time what has taken place as far as handling of drug changes in regards to the issues that have been brought forward and that this particular Bill is addressing?

Hon. Mr. Serby: — When we were reviewing the regulations and the bylaws last fall is really when this came to our attention, and as a result of that, we bring it to the legislature on this date recognizing that it was first brought to our attention or when we discovered it was last fall.

Mr. Toth: — I would take it from that comment, Mr. Minister, that it was probably through the Regulations Review Committee that that was brought to your attention, and maybe it's unfortunate that our committee doesn't meet a little more often so that we can be kept up a little more to speed at times.

And recognizing the number of pieces of legislation that are brought before the Assembly and addressing some of these concerns, I can understand how it might be easy to even just miss something like that. And while I think the process of officials going through, you'd think you've covered it all, I know in areas of business that I deal with sometimes you figure you've got every angle covered and about the time you are ready to sign something such as contracts —even Channel Lake's a reminder of that — we all of a sudden find there's other little glitches come. But just taking the time to address it, bringing forward the corrections is certainly appropriate.

As a result of this little glitch, would there be a backlog of drugs waiting to be added or changed, or was it just a process of the extra tedious paperwork that most of that's been covered in the past and the intervening time?

Hon. Mr. Serby: — There is no backlog. There is only a couple of drugs that we need to address around this issue, and that can happen fairly quickly.

Mr. Toth: — I take it then that the change is certainly and of course following federal guidelines and being automatic, it just is going to speed the process up and should, I would think, even improve some of the delivery of health services in the area, especially of drug-related concerns.

You also mentioned in your speech that changes would involve things like delisting a narcotic drug and changing it to an alternative area of the schedule. And I wonder, Mr. Minister, is this a frequent practice and is it good public policy to make it easier to delist narcotics?

Hon. Mr. Serby: — Well the determination of really what the status of a drug is, whether it's a prescription drug or a non-prescription drug, would really be determined by the federal government under the legislation and regulations under which the narcotic and food, drug regulations are established. So it would be under that jurisdiction that that decision would be made.

Mr. Toth: — Thank you, Mr. Minister. So basically what you're saying, as far as any of the changes, what this Act is basically doing is following the federal Act so the pharmaceutical association doesn't have a lot of involvement or your department wouldn't have a lot of involvement prior to delisting or adding drugs to the schedules. That indeed it comes as a result of federal policy. What this piece of legislation is doing is just allowing for a smoother flow of that recognition here in the province of Saskatchewan, is that correct?

Hon. Mr. Serby: — Correct, although from time to time the pharmaceutical association does get involved particularly in the delisting of a particular drug in the . . . particularly in schedule II, I think, is the one that they would be involved in.

Mr. Toth: — So what you're saying, Mr. Minister, and I guess that was the other question I was going to, question I was going to ask. Is there consultation ongoing with all provincial pharmaceutical associations in regards to drugs, new drugs coming on, or drugs that should be delisted on schedules? Would even the provincial Health department be contacted in regards to some of the concerns that may arise? Or does your department kind of keep up and come up with suggestions as to areas where changes could be made and passing those on to the federal regulatory body in order to make sure that any concerns provincially that we may have would be addressed?

Hon. Mr. Serby: — Well we have, of course, the pharmaceutical associations do belong to what might be called a National Drug Scheduling Advisory Committee. And their task and their role, of course, is to look at harmonizing the drugs across the country on schedules so that's . . . through that process in which there's the national participation in terms of scheduling by the pharmaceuticals.

Mr. Toth: — I thank you, Mr. Minister. Mr. Minister, as I see it, certainly the piece of legislation is correcting an area that was just missed as far as simplifying the process of identifying drugs and allowing for them to be recognized based on the federal recommendations and federal jurisdictions. Certainly it isn't a large piece of legislation but I think it's appropriate that these corrections are made.

Because it's only fair that we follow a lot of the recommendations and guidelines and that we have clarification in our legislation rather than being, I think you said this is the only province that really hasn't changed . . . got the changes made to update the Act. And so in that regard I think it's appropriate that it's done.

I guess one . . . and I guess the concern and the question that does come forward, when we talk about automatic and just automatically changing, is the fact that someone in general who really doesn't understand the process — and I'm not saying I do, I admit that — but I think when we hear just an automatic change, it leaves the person with the impression that are we being better served by automatically changing and allowing for change here.

And especially when we talk about drugs, I think the concern that is raised is do we allow the process of drug-related change to take place too quickly, which may put the consumer at risk. And I just want to ask you, Mr. Minister, whether or not the

guidelines are in place. And I guess here again we're dealing with a federal issue because we're basically following the federal recommendations. Do you feel, or are you quite comfortable with the fact that we do have a process in place that indeed addresses concerns and makes sure that there is a process followed, that we're not moving drugs forward into the area where they're available for consumer use before they have been properly looked at or channelled?

Are you quite pleased that the federal regulations are indeed addressing those concerns that maybe come forward or may arise as a result of people just seeing the word automatic in a piece of legislation such as this one?

(1630)

Hon. Mr. Serby: — Well I appreciate the question and certainly the commentary that you make. And it's absolutely correct that there is a very comprehensive extensive process in terms of the federal consultation process in terms of adding or deleting drugs to the schedule.

So there's a Canadian advertising program that is included in that process, the pharmaceuticals are involved in it, and it really is a very process-driven exercise by the federal committee. And so we're comfortable with the way in which it's determined today and so we support the process, as you know.

Mr. Toth: — I thank you, Mr. Minister. And I just want to thank you and your officials for having taken the time just to bring this forward, and recognizing the need for the changes in falling in line with other jurisdictions and certainly allowing for a more smoother process of transition. And at this time, allow the . . . more than prepared to allow this Bill to move through.

Clause 1 agreed to.

Clauses 2 and 3 agreed to.

The committee agreed to report the Bill.

Hon. Mr. Serby: — I'd like to take a moment, Mr. Chair, to thank the member opposite for the questions as they relate to this Bill. We know that sometimes when we don't have Bills that are long and extensive, we often don't take a long time to go through them. But I appreciate the time that the member has taken to review this piece of legislation and to ensure that it provides the kind of safety that Saskatchewan people will be looking for.

So I appreciate your questions, and to thank my official this afternoon for being here with me, Mr. Speaker.

THIRD READINGS

Bill No. 18 — The Pharmacy Amendment Act, 1998

Hon. Mr. Serby: — Mr. Speaker, I move the Bill be now read a third time and passed under its title.

Motion agreed to, the Bill read a third time and passed under its title.

COMMITTEE OF FINANCE

**General Revenue Fund
Health
Vote 32**

The Deputy Chair: — This being the first time Health has appeared, I will invite the minister to introduce his officials.

Hon. Mr. Serby: — Well thank you very much, Mr. Chair. I have seated beside me Mr. Neil Yeates, who is the associate deputy minister; next to Neil on the floor is Mr. Wiley, who is currently acting in the capacity of executive director of finance management and services; and right behind me is Mr. Dale Bloom, who is the assistant to the deputy minister; and seated next to Mr. Bloom is Mr. Lawrence Krahn, who is also the associate deputy minister.

I want to, Mr. Chair, just make a couple of comments as it relates to the 1998-99 budget and to highlight I think some of the issues that are important to us in the deliberations as we go over the next, I expect, maybe two or three days to complete the work of the estimates on Health. And want to just recognize some of the significant work, Mr. Chair, that has been done by this department and the officials, and in particular the district health boards across the province.

As you know, Mr. Speaker, this year's budget is in the neighbourhood of \$1.72 billion which is the largest budget that we've had in Saskatchewan's history, which is our signal on this side of the House, Mr. Chair, that Health continues to be the number one priority for Saskatchewan people and certainly this government. And this year's injection of the \$88 million — which I know we'll have some discussion about over the next few days that we're in estimates — is a major achievement again in terms of ensuring that in Saskatchewan we have a solid health care system.

As I've travelled the province over the last several weeks and months, I've met with many, many of the district health boards. I've talked with the district health boards about what some of their priorities are. And clearly, Mr. Speaker, we think . . . or Mr. Chair, we think that this budget reflects a number of the priorities in which the districts have been looking for us to achieve, to grow, and enhance health care services across the province.

I am extremely pleased, this being my first occasion to report to the House on the work of the Department of Health, the excellent working group of men and women who we have working within the department who dedicate many long hours in some very difficult times, of course, to meet the many, many expectations that are in this very large portfolio. And I want to pay a tribute this afternoon, Mr. Chair, to those people who serve the people of Saskatchewan throughout the department in accomplishing the tasks that are before us and ensuring that we have a health care system that addresses the needs of Saskatchewan people.

I want to also acknowledge the excellent working relationship that I say that the Department of Health has with many of the many, many stakeholders across the province in the health service field. In particular the close working relationship the

department and I personally have with the Saskatchewan Association of Health Organizations, which are the 32 districts across the province today, and with Saskatchewan Union of Nurses of course, who are essential in the delivery of health care services within our facilities and our communities. And our physicians in this province that are critical in helping us to meet the primary care needs of all of the people across the province.

I know that there has been some discussion about whether or not we've been meeting as best we can, the priorities across the province in Health, and I want to say to you that we try to achieve that in a balanced fashion. And today we'll have some discussion, and into the future, about how we're meeting that balance on the expenditures of the 1.72 billion.

And today we're in a different place in terms of what we're doing with health. We believe that the governance piece is behind us, and today we're developing of course a very important process in the delivery of services across the province.

And I'm pleased of course to be part of a process where we have public ownership of the needs because district boards today are developing those needs at the local level, and of course, have in place men and women across this province who've been both elected and appointed who serve us very well in setting the priorities in this stage to what the future of health care will continue to be and grow. And I am very pleased to have the ability to be part of that process in the months and weeks to come.

I also want to indicate that when people talk about the direction of health care into the future, clearly our plan has always been that we needed to do a number of things. One is consistent to what's happening across the country, and that of course is that we're moving more to community-based services. In this province today we see a major, major injection of health funding and resources to the community-based side.

We're moving from institution to community, and as I sit around the table with my provincial counterparts from across the country, this is exactly the direction that they're taking as well. And although we've taken many steps in advance of what's happening across the country, Saskatchewan continues to be a leader in the process of moving from institution to community-based services.

I also want to highlight that in this budget we've added additional funding of course to home care which is clearly the direction in which we're going to be moving, as are other provinces across the country.

The further priority that our health plan has always talked about, Mr. Chair, is that we want to bring services closer to home, and there are many, many good examples of work that we're doing across the province today. We've had the CT scanner, as an example, that we opened in Prince Albert just this past winter, I think in January, which again provides for people to receive that kind of diagnostic testing right within their own communities.

The renal dialysis services that are now in Lloydminster and Prince Albert; just recently announced the services in Tisdale

and of course in Yorkton; the new MRI (magnetic resonance imaging) that's going to be here in Regina; and the injection of money — new money — to ambulatory services across the province are some of the things that we're doing today to bring services closer to home.

And we recognize the value of course as I've outlined in our health professionals with our new doctors' contract that we have in the province. And this budget also addresses itself to the front-line employees where you see some additional funding going in to the front-line workers in the areas of long-term care and home care.

(1645)

And of course at the same time we recognize the sensitivities that are out there in Saskatchewan Land around things like the capital needs the communities have and recently, as the member from Cannington knows, we were in their community at Wawota announcing and of course opening the new health care facility. Recently I've travelled to Ponteix and have opened that new facility. I was in Norquay a few months back for the opening of their new facility.

I've just recently turned the sod in Balcarres for a new health care centre in Balcarres, and will be later this summer in Meadow Lake for a function that they'll have in Meadow Lake because there'll be a new health care facility that's going up in Meadow Lake — another example of the many objectives that have been set for us by the district health boards our government has been responding to in a variety of different ways.

Clearly, Mr. Speaker, we recognize that we don't agree all the time with our members across the floor because we have philosophical differences of course in the way in which they believe we should deliver health care services in this province and from what we believe.

We believe that we need to have universal medicare in this province and will continue to support that process. We'll continue to have as our first priority, health services and we'll continue that kind of funding into the future. And we're doing this, Mr. Chair, by and large on our own. There are no user fees in this province, and we don't anticipate that we'll see user fees in this province under this administration.

We do not believe in the issue of privatization of health care, which I hear on a regular basis from the members opposite, on the process of how we might develop that funding schedule, to ensure that the people who are sick and ill in this province end up making the largest contributions to a privatized health system. Because we too on this side of the House, Mr. Chair, do not believe in a privatized health care system.

And I said, we're doing this on our own; that the Saskatchewan government is putting in the health care dollars to ensure that we can meet the needs of people across the country, and are extremely pleased that we can continue to announce to the people of Saskatchewan through this process here, that our first priority is health care in this province. And we'll continue to fund it in a fashion that will ensure that that remains our priority into the future, Mr. Chair.

So with those opening comments, I would be pleased to respond to the questions that my friends and colleagues opposite might have of me, Mr. Chair.

Subvote (HE01)

Mr. Toth: — Thank you, Mr. Deputy Chair. Mr. Deputy Chair, it's an interesting time to be debating health care. And I want to welcome the . . . thank the minister actually for appearing and his officials who are with us today, some who I recognize. Actually a number have been around for awhile as well and have gone through a lot of growing pains I guess you would say, in the area of health care.

But I would suggest as we talk about the changes in the future and listening to the minister's opening comments, I'm not exactly sure, Mr. Minister, that a lot of people in Saskatchewan are going to believe and really adhere to a lot of the comments and really feel that with the third, or better than a third — I believe it's about 40 per cent, close to 40 per cent of the provincial budget — is actually ending up in health care.

I'm not exactly sure that the people of this province feel that the funds that are being directed into health care right now, at 1.72 billion, are being directed to health care in a manner that really suits the needs of the consumer, if I can use that expression, or the person who needs and finds himself in a situation where they could utilize and must utilize health care services in the province of Saskatchewan.

Mr. Minister, as you indicated last night . . . And I will certainly give you credit for taking the time to attend some meetings that haven't been all that easy. I know what it's like to go to public meetings where you know the crowd isn't necessarily all that enamoured with your presence or really favourable of your presence at it, so I commend you for taking the time to attend. I've found that even if people really aren't all that pleased to see you there, at the same time they will acknowledge the fact that you were willing to walk into the lion's den at times, if you will.

Having said that though however, I think, Mr. Minister, you would have to acknowledge . . . and what we've seen and as a Sask Party rep and as an opposition member for the past two terms and certainly an opposition member who was here when your counterpart, Ms. Simard, basically began to take us down the road of change in health care in Saskatchewan, talking about a wellness model that was going to provide for us well into the future — a wellness model that said we're going to take away services, we're going to eliminate facilities, we're going to eliminate positions, we're going to eliminate jobs, and it's going to provide better health care.

And at that time, Mr. Minister, while the minister was making those changes, the previous minister, I'm sure people sat back and gave some sort of a nod and said, well you know, while they didn't like it immediately, originally they still felt there was time to at least give some thought and allow for some of the changes and see whether or not the changes might meet the need out there.

And when the change to . . . or when the determination to close the Plains Health Centre was made back in 1993, and you may

or may not be aware of the fact that a rally was held on the legislative steps at that time, but at that time it didn't generate a lot of interest.

And I find it interesting to date, and I think what it reflects is the fact that most people believe when announcements are made that there's enough time, and possibly by the time that process takes place — and at that time, it was by the year 1998 rolls around — the government's going to begin to recognize that maybe they cannot continue to go through with all the closures and that we may see some changes take place.

So while there wasn't a lot of, I would say, upfront people that were speaking out upfront against the closure of the Plains health care centre in 1993, certainly in the last two or three weeks — actually months in fact, but more so in the last two or three weeks as a result of the legislature coming into session — it gives people more of an opportunity to have more of a public voice. We're seeing people standing up more and more and speaking out on the issue.

And in many ways, Mr. Deputy Chairman, and Mr. Minister, I agree when we look at health care we must look at how we best utilize, how we best fund, how we best provide the services. And in some cases I can see where some of the arguments in regards to the Plains health care centre may be based on personal situations.

And certainly, Mr. Minister, I've had the privilege of visiting in the Plains health care centre on a number of occasions. I've chatted with individuals who have been admitted to the Plains health care centre, and I would have to say that in my constituency the Plains tends to be the hospital I tend to go through more often than not; very little to the Pasqua and certainly somewhat to the General. But in general I find more of the constituents that I run to visit or have been informed about tend to be in the Plains health care . . . referred to the Plains health care centre and of course it has a lot to do with the trauma and certainly heart situations that people face.

And so what I find, and I have to reiterate, that and the same concern and the issue that's been raised over the past number of days and weeks and months, is the fact that the Plains does play a vital role in the area of health delivery and the area of service delivery to the constituents of southern Saskatchewan.

As I look at the Plains health care centre, and I look at the original intention to build the health facility, the health facility was based in . . . and some of the arguments that are being presented today about the fact that, and I believe you've said it, Mr. Minister, that studies say that the city of Regina doesn't need more than two facilities. That it doesn't need more than, I believe now you're using the number of 675 beds, when the Plains eventually closes its doors and all of the services are moved to the General and the Pasqua; those beds are going to remain.

That could be true in the regard that you've already eliminated so many beds, and it's just a matter of the fact that what's left in the Plains can easily be accommodated. And I would think I would be disappointed if they wouldn't be accommodated when we look at the expenditure that's been put into refurbishing the General and the Pasqua hospitals.

But one would have to ask, Mr. Minister, if indeed we are spending the money as wisely as we can. If indeed the expenditures at the General and the Pasqua are being expended wisely. If indeed we should not have taken a more careful look at the Plains health care centre and the services it can deliver, its accessibility to rural Saskatchewan. The fact that in southern Saskatchewan, and certainly across the majority of southern Saskatchewan, we have had so many acute care beds eliminated from the system. The fact that the elimination of beds in rural facilities and rural centres, certainly you would have to sit back and begin to ask yourself, are 675 beds going to provide the adequate care that is needed, given the fact that we have eliminated so many beds outside of the city of Regina.

And, Mr. Minister, maybe you do have an argument for the fact that we only need so many beds in the city of Regina; I'm not disputing that fact. I think having been involved in government, some of the decisions were made as well in looking at how you rationalize and how you better serve and provide your funding, and make sure the funding goes into services.

Bed numbers, so many times, are used as a means of saying this is how we justify services but I don't know by . . . that eliminating beds specifically meets the need and the requirement out there all the time. And when we come to . . . when I talk about elimination of beds, I look to some of the bed numbers that . . . eliminations that have taken place in small rural centres, such as the ones I represent, of Moosomin and Broadview and Kipling and other communities.

And, Mr. Minister, what I've found in talking to people that are giving the care and giving the service, delivering the service, that eliminating beds at some times and has in many occasions actually created a problem for hospitals such as we're seeing taking place in the province in the city of Regina right now.

What do I mean by that? I mean like, for an example, when the Pipestone Health District eliminated a number of beds and decided they weren't going to fund them anymore and part of their argument was, well the average daily census for the hospital of Moosomin is — and I forget what the number was, and where we're at right now, but it was a certain number — and we have more beds than we're actually using on an average daily basis; therefore we're going to cut down on the number we're funding and we're going to physically remove the beds out of the facility so that they can't be utilized to the point that, Mr. Minister, on a number of occasions we found — as nurses have reiterated to me and brought to my attention — situations where in one case — a major traffic accident — there were five people in stretchers in hallways right throughout the evening because there were not the physical beds in place to meet the need of individuals that required them at the time.

And I guess my argument is, Mr. Minister, why are we moving beds? Why do we have to physically remove that bed that's already been paid for? If it sits there idle, it's not costing you anything. Now for some reason you seem to think every time a bed is sitting in a facility, because the bed is there, it's costing you money to have someone there to look after the bed. If they're not, the bed isn't being utilized, it's not costing you anything.

And the fact that an average daily census doesn't necessarily

mean that you've got, if a hospital has 10 beds, that those 10 beds are continually being utilized. There are times, Mr. Minister, when you don't have a major problem, you may be down to five or six beds being utilized. But there are also times when you see there's an influx as a result of different elements that take place due to some of the climatic factors we face; that by eliminating and physical removing the beds, you take away the ability of that facility to meet the needs that all of a sudden they're left with.

That doesn't necessarily mean that it's costing more. You may use five more beds but on the other hand there are periods of time when you are actually utilizing fewer beds than what you're actually funding. So I guess I have a bit of an argument with the fact that we physically remove and take beds out of service. And that's the argument that comes in with the Plains.

When we look at the Plains, I have to ask you, Mr. Minister, your argument is 675 beds will meet the need. Now those, as I said earlier, those beds were based on a survey and a study that was done in the city of Regina. But since the elimination of all the acute care services and bed numbers in rural Saskatchewan, is 675 going to meet that need?

I believe in the Atkinson study back in 1991, there was some suggestions that beds required would be 966 based on 1991 numbers. The bed-need breakdown, as it talked about and went through the Regina General, the Pasqua Hospital, the Plains Health Centre, and the breakdown of . . .

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

The committee reported progress.

The Assembly adjourned at 5:01 p.m.

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