

The Assembly met at 1:30 p.m.

Prayers

ROUTINE PROCEEDINGS

PRESENTING PETITIONS

Mr. Hermanson: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to present a petition to retain the Lanigan and Watrous hospitals. And this petition recognizes that the Living Sky Health District is considering closing the Lanigan and Watrous hospitals. And that health care in many areas has already been gutted due to provincial government policy.

Wherefore your petitioners will ever pray that your Hon. Assembly may be pleased to cause the provincial government to take the necessary steps to ensure the Lanigan and Watrous hospitals remain open.

Mr. Speaker, these petitioners come from Guernsey and from the Lanigan area.

I so present them.

Ms. Draude: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I also have a petition today that pleads with the government not to allow the Lanigan and Watrous hospitals to close.

Wherefore your petitioners will ever pray that your Hon. Assembly may be pleased to cause the provincial government to take the necessary steps to ensure the Lanigan and Watrous hospitals remain open.

The people that have signed this petition are from Lanigan and Jansen, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Gantefoer: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I too rise on behalf of citizens concerned about the impending closures of hospitals in the province. The prayer reads as follows:

Wherefore your petitioners will ever pray that your Hon. Assembly may be pleased to cause the provincial government to take the necessary steps to ensure the Lanigan and Watrous hospitals remain open.

Signatures on this petition, Mr. Speaker, are from the communities of Lanigan and Lockwood.

I so present.

Ms. Jones: — I'd like to present a petition requesting that smoking be banned in all public places. These petitions were collected by the youth of Saskatchewan.

Ms. Eagles: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, I too stand today to present a petition on behalf of Saskatchewan citizens concerned about the future of the Lanigan and Watrous hospitals. And the prayer reads as follows:

Wherefore your petitioners will ever pray that your Hon. Assembly may be pleased to cause the provincial government to take the necessary steps to ensure the

Lanigan and Watrous hospitals remain open.

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

And this is signed by citizens of Lanigan, Guernsey, and Drake.

I so present. Thank you.

Mr. Harper: — To present a petition requesting that smoking be banned from all public places. These petitions are collected by the youth of Saskatchewan.

Mr. Wall: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise on behalf of people in my constituency and around the province concerned about the high price of fuel. And the prayer reads as follows:

Wherefore your petitioners humbly pray that your Hon. Assembly may be pleased to cause the federal and provincial governments to immediately reduce fuel taxes by 10 cents a litre, cost shared by both levels of government.

And the petition is signed by people from Climax, Swift Current, Kincaid, Preeceville, and Shamrock.

I so present, Mr. Speaker.

Ms. Bakken: — Mr. Speaker, I rise today to present a petition on behalf of people in Saskatchewan who are concerned about the crisis in health care.

Wherefore your petitioners will ever pray that your Hon. Assembly may be pleased to cause the provincial government to take the necessary steps to ensure the Lanigan and Watrous hospitals remain open.

And this is signed by residents of Lanigan and Radisson.

I so present.

Mr. Bjornerud: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I also have a petition to present . . . people of Saskatchewan concerned about the possible closure of the Lanigan and Watrous hospital. The prayer reads:

Wherefore your petitioners will ever pray that your Hon. Assembly may be pleased to cause the provincial government to take the necessary steps to ensure the Lanigan and Watrous hospitals remain open.

The community involved in this petition, Mr. Speaker, are all from the community of Lanigan.

I so present.

Mr. Weekes: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I also rise to read a petition from citizens concerned about hospital closures:

Wherefore your petitioners will ever pray that your Hon. Assembly may be pleased to cause the provincial government to take the necessary steps to ensure the Lanigan and Watrous hospitals remain open.

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

Signed by the citizens from Lanigan, Burr, and Drake. Thank you.

Mr. Brkich: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have a petition to reduce fuel tax by 10 cents a litre.

Wherefore your petitioners humbly pray that your Hon. Assembly may be pleased to cause the federal and provincial governments to immediately reduce fuel taxes by 10 cents a litre, cost shared by both levels of government.

As in duty bound, your petitioners will ever pray.

Signed by the good citizens from Saskatoon, Regina, Foam Lake, Davidson, and Aylesbury.

I so present.

Ms. Harpauer: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I too stand to read a petition from citizens concerned about hospital closures. The prayer reads:

Wherefore your petitioners will ever pray that your Hon. Assembly may be pleased to cause the provincial government to take the necessary steps to ensure the Lanigan and Watrous hospitals remain open.

The petitioners are from the communities of Humboldt, Lanigan, and Drake, and there's a few from Saskatoon who are concerned about citizens in Lanigan. Thank you.

Mr. Wakefield: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have a petition regarding cellular coverage.

Wherefore your petitioners humbly pray that your Hon. Assembly may be pleased to cause the government to provide reliable cellular telephone service in the districts of Strasbourg, Duval, Govan, and Bulyea.

These citizens come from Cymric, Duval, and Govan. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Hart: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I too have a petition to present on behalf of citizens concerned with poor cellular telephone coverage. The prayer reads as follows:

Wherefore your petitioners humbly pray that your Hon. Assembly may be pleased to cause the government to provide reliable cellular telephone service in the districts of Strasbourg, Duval, Govan, and Bulyea.

And the signatures to this petition come from the communities of Duval, Strasbourg, and Regina.

I so present.

Mr. Allchurch: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, I rise in the Assembly today to bring forth a petition regarding the closure of the Lanigan and Watrous hospital:

Wherefore your petitioners will ever pray that your Hon. Assembly may be pleased to cause the provincial government to take the necessary steps to ensure the Lanigan and Watrous hospitals remain open.

And the signatures on this petition are from Davidson and Lanigan.

I so present.

Mr. Stewart: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to present a petition signed by citizens concerned with the possible closures of the Lanigan and Watrous hospitals. And the prayer reads:

Wherefore your petitioners will ever pray that your Hon. Assembly may be pleased to cause the provincial government to take the necessary steps to ensure the Lanigan and Watrous hospitals remain open.

This petition is signed by individuals from Watson, Lanigan, Saskatoon, Creelman, and Drake.

I so present.

Mr. Kwiatkowski: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is with great responsibility that I rise as well to present a petition to retain Lanigan and Watrous hospitals. The prayer reads as follows:

Wherefore your petitioners will ever pray that your Hon. Assembly may be pleased to cause the provincial government to take the necessary steps to ensure the Lanigan and Watrous hospitals remain open.

As is duty bound, your petitioners will ever pray.

This petition, Mr. Speaker, is signed by the good citizens of Allan and Young, Saskatchewan.

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.

Petitions of citizens of the province on the following matters, petitioning the Assembly:

To halt the amalgamation of municipalities;

To reduce fuel taxes;

To not confiscate municipal reserve accounts;

To provide reliable cellular service in Prud'homme, Bruno, Vonda, and Cudworth; and

To ensure the Lanigan and Watrous hospitals remain open.

NOTICES OF MOTIONS AND QUESTIONS

Ms. Harpauer: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I give notice that I

shall on day no. 59 ask the government the following question:

To the Minister of Environment and Resource Management: who is presently leasing the Blackstrap ski lodge and hill; and what is the cost of the lease; and how long have they been leasing the property?

And while I'm on feet I would also like to give notice that on day no. 59 that I would like to ask the Minister of Environment and Resource Management:

Have there been any grants made available to the Blackstrap ski resort in the last fiscal year?

Thank you.

Mr. Brkich: — Mr. Speaker, I too have a notice of a written question. I give notice that I shall on day no. 59 ask the government the following question:

To the Minister of SaskWater: what was the cost to the government for the minister's recent flight to Lucky Lake for an announcement dealing with the Pak-Wel Investment?

INTRODUCTION OF GUESTS

Hon. Ms. Hamilton: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's indeed a pleasure to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly, 29 grade five students sitting in the west gallery from the constituency of Regina Wascana Plains and the school, W. S. Hawrylak School.

Mr. Speaker, I've had the opportunity to be in W. S. Hawrylak School on a number of occasions and been warmly welcomed. So I'm going to ask all members to do that today. They're accompanied by their teacher Ms. Carol Borowski and parent chaperones and some student chaperones.

Mr. Speaker, there's another reason why Ms. Borowski would be a special person to this Assembly because she is also the mother of one of our very hard working pages, Charla Borowski. I would ask all members and Charla to join with me in welcoming Ms. Borowski and the grade five students from W. S. Hawrylak School.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Brkich: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I too have a school group here today. It's my first one since I've been here in the legislature.

This group is sitting here in the east gallery. They're from Schell School from the town of Holdfast. There's 21 grade 5 and 6 students here.

I would like to introduce their teacher, Ms. Lynn Ledingham; chaperones Chris and Louise Rogoschewsky, Bridget Kascey, and Rod Measner.

I want to welcome them here as I know all the members will. And I hope that they find their visit here a most entertaining and educational, and afterwards I will try and answer, if they have

any questions on the proceedings here. Thank you.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Wall: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. There are two groups that I'd like to introduce to you and through you to the members of this Assembly here today. The first group I'd like to introduce on behalf of the member for Cypress Hills.

Mr. Speaker, in your gallery are 18 students from the Eastend School in Eastend, Saskatchewan. They are accompanied by their teachers, Shelley Morvik, and Marie Hanson. And also with them for the ride are bus drivers Kurt Humphrey and Dennis Elhard, the brother of the member for Cypress Hills, Mr. Speaker.

I'll leave it to the members gathered to pick out which one might be related to the member for Cypress Hills.

Also while I'm on my feet, while I'm on my feet, Mr. Speaker, I'd like to introduce to you and through you to the members of the Assembly, 15 students from Wymark School in my constituency. They are seated in the east gallery.

And they are accompanied by their teacher, Sandra Crooks, and also several chaperones have joined them, Ken Martens, Darlene Dyck, Marlene Wieler, and Jake Schlamp.

And, Mr. Speaker, I had a chance to meet with this group just prior to question period. They had excellent questions, and I enjoyed my time with them.

I'd ask all members of the Assembly to join in welcoming both of these groups of students from southwest Saskatchewan.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

STATEMENTS BY MEMBERS

Privatized Health Care Results in Bankruptcies in United States

Hon. Mr. Hillson: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, on this side of the House, we support publicly funded medicare because we believe and experience has shown that this is the most efficient and fair way to deliver health care.

Well, Mr. Speaker, if we needed any further proof, there's a new study out of the United States which reveals where privatized health care leads.

The study, to be published next month in a finance journal, *Norton Bankruptcy Law Advisor*, tells us that 500,000 Americans in 1999 filed for bankruptcy because of heavy medical bills. Forty per cent of all personal bankruptcies in the US (United States) were the result of medical bills.

It will come as no surprise that those hardest hit were the elderly women and single-parent families headed by women. These families, the studies quote, are just one serious illness away from financial collapse.

Yes, Mr. Speaker, we have our problems with health care.

There are serious issues which must be addressed. But these statistics prove that no matter what Premier Klein, Stockwell Day, and the Saskatchewan Party may say, America-style privatized health care is not the way to go.

This study comes at a good time, Mr. Speaker. Those who accuse the defenders of medicare as being nostalgic for the good, old days should be advised as to the cruel reality of what they advocate.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Retirement of Dr. Roy Holm

Ms. Eagles: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, today I would like to congratulate Rev. Dr. Roy Holm on his retirement.

It was 40 years ago that Rev. Holm graduated from the seminary in St. Louis, Missouri, and came to serve as pastor of St. Peter's Lutheran Church in Estevan and St. Luke Lutheran Church in Midale.

After 18 years of service, he moved to Regina where he became district president, a position he held for 22 years and he chaired his final meeting as president last night in Yorkton. I have the highest regard for Rev. Holm, and I know he is no stranger to this Assembly.

And I ask all members to join me in wishing Rev. and Mrs. Holm all the best. God bless them both.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Decoration Day Ceremony

Mr. Harper: — Mr. Speaker, today is the 66th anniversary of D-Day. The day when Allied troops from Canada, Britain and United States hit the beaches of Normandy and began the liberation of Europe — the beginning of the end of World War II. On this day, I know we'll take a moment to remember those brave soldiers from all nations who fought and fell on that longest day.

There's another ceremony associated with D-Day, less known but equally as important — Decoration Day. It occurs on the Sunday closest to June 6. On this day, members of the Royal Canadian Legion across the nation meet to clean veterans' gravesites and take part in a brief, solemn ceremony in remembrance at those sites.

I was happy on Sunday to represent the Premier and the Government of Saskatchewan at Decoration Day in Regina held at Riverside Memorial Park. I was proud to join with legion and members and families of the veterans to lay a wreath. A small ceremony to honour a great sacrifice. Thank you.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Provincial Mine Rescue and Emergency Response Competition

Ms. Harpauer: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On May 27, the

Provincial Mine Rescue and Emergency Response Competition was held here in Regina. At this competition, 18 teams comprised entirely of employees from various Saskatchewan mines competed in a variety of events, which included a written test, a simulated mine disaster, a firefighting competition, and a mock emergency situation which required the application of complex first aid treatment.

Since my brother was involved with mine safety and rescue training and competitions for many many years, I'm well aware of the intense training and physically challenging . . . involved for the dedicated people who chose to serve on my emergency response team.

I'm very proud to say that the team which captured the title of overall provincial champions in the soft rock division were from PCS (Potash Corporation of Saskatchewan Inc.) Lanigan potash mine in my constituency. Mr. Speaker, it would be very nice to assure this very competent group of individuals that once they've done their part in a mine accident, that there would be a hospital in Lanigan for the victims to use.

The members of the commendable team are Lloyd Greve, Mike Kleiter, Lynn Knaus, Dave Powell, Ken Worobec, Terry Pisiso, Nola Koberinksi, Knute Olsen, and Doug Hushagen.

I would like all the members to join me in congratulating this outstanding team who are committed to mine emergency response.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Scientific Research Station at Eastend T-Rex Centre

Mr. Yates: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. More good news for Saskatchewan. I am pleased to inform this House about a major announcement made yesterday concerning the Eastend T-Rex Centre. The Royal Saskatchewan Museum will establish a scientific research station in the recently built centre.

The government has signed a deal with the Eastend Community Tourism Authority relocating and expanding the museum's fossil research station in the new centre. The goal of this sustainable partnership is protecting the rich fossil resources of the south-west Saskatchewan area for future generations while providing educational and tourism opportunities. The museum will conduct fossil research, collection, and preservation activities from the new centre, Mr. Speaker.

In addition, they will assist with the centre's exhibits, education, and interpretative programs. In addition, the museum's involvement of our government has provided a 1.2 million capital grant from Economic and Co-operative Development to match contributions raised by the community. SaskEnergy has also contributed \$300,000 for educational programming.

The members on this side of the House extend congratulations to the Eastend Community Tourism Authority and the Royal Saskatchewan Museum for their dedication, vision, and co-operative approach that has led to the construction of this new centre and the agreement around it.

We also acknowledge the local business of the Eastend community for their huge effort in this endeavour. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

Volunteer Recognition Awards

Mr. Weekes: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, I would like to recognize three special people who were honoured recently by receiving volunteer recognition awards.

Mr. Speaker, the North Central Regional Recreational Association have awarded Lorraine Kouznitsoff of Blaine Lake, and Raymond and Gisele Desjardins, formerly of Marcelin, with volunteer recognition awards.

As well as farming and raising a family, Lorraine has been active in the community of Blaine Lake. Active in the Doukhobor Church ladies group, coaching girls' softball, president of the figure skating club, and member of the local and Wapiti Regional Library Boards, as well as various activities for the Blaine Lake Recreation Board has rightfully earned her the 2000 Volunteer Recognition Award for Sport and Special Services.

Raymond and Gisele received the 2000 Volunteer Recognition Award for Special Services. Raymond was chairperson and secretary for the Marcelin Board of Trade, held the position of Grand Knight and District Deputy in the Knights of Columbus, and served on the Marcelin Credit Union board.

Gisele was a teacher's aide, served on the Marcelin Recreation Board, sat on the Marcelin Library Board, and was secretary and then mayor of the village of Marcelin. Over 30 years she has held various executive positions with the local Catholic Women's League.

Please join me in congratulating these three dedicated individuals on the well-deserved recognition bestowed upon them.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

World Environment Week

Mr. Trew: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, June 4 to 10 is environment . . . pardon me, World Environment Week. Yesterday, the United Nations had proclaimed World Environment Day. Tomorrow is the second annual Clean Air Day.

The common theme of all is community action on clean air and climate change, and certainly, Mr. Speaker, community action is very important. But community action, like everything else in life, starts with one individual and then grows from there.

This 29th annual environmental week is held to help us celebrate the commitment of literally thousands of Saskatchewan people as they make choices each day to help create a cleaner, healthier environment.

Today, Mr. Speaker, let us celebrate the small victories we've

made for our environment and let us all resolve to be much more diligent with our one and only environment, our world.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Saskatchewan Economy Growing

Ms. Jones: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Citizens of Saskatchewan have reason to be confident with the growing economy. Ten thousand more new jobs have been created in the first part of this year over last year — 10,000 more new jobs.

Companies are expanding, and compared to the 1980s, more and more people are choosing to make Saskatchewan their home. Saskatchewan people have shown their confidence in the economic stability of this province by spending more on retail sales.

Mr. Speaker, people in this province have been shopping till they drop. Figures from StatsCanada show that Saskatchewan sales have increased 9.1 per cent during January through April of this year over the same period in 1999. This 9.1 per cent more than doubles and almost triples the national per cent change of 3.4.

Saskatchewan's per cent of change is the second best showing in the entire country. We play second to only one province, and no, it isn't Alberta. In fact Alberta finishes fourth at 4.7 per cent. Ontario finishes behind Alberta at 3.6 per cent.

Mr. Speaker, we're encouraged by these numbers. The numbers prove that what members on this side of the House are saying is true. Saskatchewan continues to grow and the people of this province are confident in the economy.

Gloom and doom? Not from this side, Mr. Speaker. Only optimism.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

ORAL QUESTIONS

Wascana Centre Prohibition on Sports

Mr. McMorris: — Well, well, Mr. Speaker, it's official. The Premier has turned into a grumpy old man. He's now leaning out of his office window, shaking his fist, and yelling: hey kids, get off my front yard.

Mr. Speaker, we now have the government telling kids that they can't play a game of pickup football on the lawn of the legislature. Mr. Speaker, I think one of the greatest things about driving up to this building in the summertime is seeing kids toss a football or a Frisbee around and there are many days I'd love to join them.

Mr. Premier, this building doesn't belong to you. It belongs to everyone, including those kids. Mr. Premier, will you lift this ridiculous regulation or restriction and allow the kids to play on the front lawn of the Legislative Building?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Mr. Romanow: — Mr. Speaker, I would suggest to the hon. member opposite that perhaps what he ought to do is have a check with his local optometrist because I was not shaking my fist at those outside having fun and enjoying the park; I was shaking my fist at the Saskatchewan Party and saying they should be going.

Rather, our position is that this park is for the enjoyment of all the people of Regina and Saskatchewan. We do not like the decision taken by the Wascana board. The minister in charge has written, or is about to write, requesting that the matter be reviewed and that they take a second look from the point of view of making it enjoyable even to the occasional and odd Saskatchewan Party member who happens to be around.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. McMorris: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The government is raising concerns that the lawn is being damaged. I think that was the biggest reason. And I think that's ridiculous. People have been playing ball on the front lawn of the legislature for as long as I can remember. And the front lawn looks pretty darn good to me.

Mr. Speaker, I even understand on Saturdays that some of the media like to get together and have a quick game of football out on the front lawn. Believe me, these guys aren't exactly tearing up the turf with their blinding speed.

Mr. Speaker, if a bunch of middle-aged reporters want to get together on a Saturday afternoon and sweat like Elvis, let them do it. What's wrong with that?

My question is to the Premier. Mr. Premier, lighten up. Lift this ridiculous ban and let the people enjoy the facilities.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Mr. Romanow: — Mr. Speaker, I want to tell you that I am feeling pretty light. I'm not sure that I'm looking as light as I should. We are lightened up on this side. I've said to the member before and I'm going to repeat it in the second question and second answer — we believe that this park should be used for the enjoyment of all the people, including organized or disorganized sports.

In fact I'm told the incident stemmed from the fact that one Murray Mandryk, and Mark Wyatt and a few others in their weekly or daily football matches were playing and somehow the people at Wascana Park viewed that this was an organized sports match involving Murray and company.

I want to tell you how light I am about this. I extend a challenge to the Leader of the Official Opposition and to all of your crowd. We'll put together a team; we'll have a nice little friendly game outside in Wascana Park.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Converting Paved Highways to Gravel

Mr. Bjornerud: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, my question is for the Minister of Highways.

Mr. Speaker, yesterday the Minister of Highways revealed that his department plans to turn a number of Saskatchewan highways back to grid roads. Mr. Speaker, this is a clear admission that this government has basically given up on maintaining the highway system in this province. They simply can't make up for the nine years of underfunding and neglect and instead they start to plan to convert highways to grid roads.

Mr. Minister, Saskatchewan people deserve to know what you plan to do with their highway system. Will you table a list of the highways that you plan to turn back to gravel?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Mr. Sonntag: — Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. First of all, the member have heard . . . the member and members opposite have heard me say many times that we, on this side of the House, have identified highways and transportation as a very high priority, that's why we put \$250 million this year, Mr. Speaker, into our provincial budget — a 6.6 per cent increase, Mr. Speaker.

I think it's interesting though that members opposite even seem to be divided. I want to read a quote, Mr. Speaker, for you, out of *The Leader-Post* of April 15, 2000. The member from Cypress Hills says the following:

However, there is only so much construction (that) the province can complete each year as long as the federal government refuses to contribute its share of twinning costs, Elhard said.

Mr. Speaker, I want to remind members also that at an interest cost on the public debt that they have created over there, Mr. Speaker, of \$2 million a day, can you only imagine how many roads we could fix and repair and construct each and every year?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Bjornerud: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Well, Mr. Minister, when you've underfunded highways for nine years, 6 per cent just isn't going to cut it.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Bjornerud: — Mr. Speaker, first the NDP (New Democratic Party) gave us two-tier health care. Now they're giving us two-tier highway system.

Mr. Speaker, last week we raised the issue of Highway 18 from Bracken to Climax. This highway is so bad the school bus can no longer drive on it. The minister said that tenders have been let to fix Highway 18.

Mr. Speaker, the Saskatchewan Party has learned that the contract has now been awarded, but the contract not to repair it but to turn Highway 18 back to gravel, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Minister, will you confirm that's your plan — to turn Highway 18 back to gravel — and will you again table a list of highways that you plan to turn back into gravel.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Mr. Sonntag: — Mr. Speaker, many people . . . many members, I should say, on this side of the House will remember 1984. You remember how . . . To the public of Saskatchewan I say, do you remember how we used to repair roads? It was with equipment we had.

I want to refer you to a specific date — May 16 and 17, 1984. It was a very significant day. There was an auction sale held that day, Mr. Speaker. There were tractors, loaders, graders, trucks, trailers, scrapers, asphalt equipment, conveyors, compactors, and much, much more. In total, Mr. Speaker, 436 pieces of equipment were sold on May 16 and 17, 1984.

That's how we . . . that's the equipment that we used to use, Mr. Speaker, to repair equipment. On top of them . . . They get rid of the equipment, on top of that, Mr. Speaker, what did they do? They create a huge debt, an interest cost of \$2 million a day. Imagine again, I say, how many roads we could repair with that amount of money.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Bjornerud: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Well, Mr. Speaker, I don't think it's a matter of a shortage of machinery and equipment. It's a short of money to fix the highways.

Mr. Speaker, this morning on the radio they were talking about a new reality-based TV show where contestants are forced to live like it's the 19th century. I thought they must have stolen the idea from this NDP government. People in rural Saskatchewan are already being forced to live like it's the 19th century. Hospitals are being converted to health centres. Highways are being converted to grid roads. Schools are being converted to bakeries. It's no wonder so many NDP MLAs (Member of the Legislative Assembly) were converted to former MLAs in the last election, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Bjornerud: — Mr. Speaker, if the Minister of Highways plans to turn highways back to gravel, then he should lay his plan on the table and let people of Saskatchewan know what highways they are.

Mr. Minister, which highways will remain as highways and which ones, once again, are you going to turn back to gravel?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Mr. Sonntag: — Mr. Speaker, I find this absolutely incredulous. He's saying . . . the member opposite talks about shortage of money, and each day — including today — there were several petitions, Mr. Speaker, from those members opposite to reduce the fuel tax. And I don't know how they expect that we are to, with a reduced fuel tax, pay for more construction, Mr. Speaker.

This year, Mr. Speaker, we've seen a 6.6 per cent increase in our budget, up to \$250 million. Mr. Speaker, in the last four years we've seen a 49 per cent increase in our Highways budget, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Mr. Sonntag: — We're doing what we can, Mr. Speaker, but we need the federal government at the table as well to assist us with much more repair and construction here in Saskatchewan.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Bjornerud: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. But, Mr. Minister, you're not doing either. You're not lowering the gas tax, and you're not fixing the highways — at least do one or the other.

Mr. Speaker, today in Val Marie, local people from the village and RM (rural municipality) are out fixing their own highway. One of our MLAs (Member of the Legislative Assembly) is out there, and I hear the president of the SGEU (Saskatchewan Government and General Employees' Union) is also out to help.

I just hope the government is planning to force the volunteer highway crew to join a union.

Mr. Minister, today in Val Marie we may be getting a glimpse of the future. If the NDP starts turning highways back to gravel, then the next step is to turn maintenance of those grid roads over to the municipalities. And I'm sure some of the government won't be giving RMs any extra money to take on this responsibility.

Mr. Minister, is this your real plan? To turn highways back to gravel, then download them on a municipality? Is it part of your plan to turn some of these highways back over to the RMs?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Mr. Sonntag: — Mr. Speaker, in many ways we really do have to admire the spirit of people from the community out . . . and even in the area of Val Marie and communities around there for what they do. Certainly the people of that community have worked together, as they have worked in filling those pot . . . in those potholes, as they have worked for the last 10 years filling the biggest pothole, Mr. Speaker. That's the pothole of debt that those members have created over the 10 years that they were in government. At \$2 million a day, Mr. Speaker — interest on the public debt — \$2 million a day, you can only imagine how many roads could be repaired and how many roads we could have constructed each and every year . . . each and every day, as a matter of fact, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Maintenance of Highway 349 between Naicam and Archerwill

Ms. Draude: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My question is also for the Minister of Highways. The minister has been quick to respond saying they're going to fix Highway No. 18 and No. 4 when they brought it up in the House. So I thought I would mention a highway in my constituency that is in desperate need of help.

The Highway No. 349 between Naicam and Archerwill is a

disaster, Mr. Minister. The work done last year was just over a kilometre, and already those patches are heaving. The schedule for this year will only see 2 kilometres more of the road being patched, and there's over a hundred kilometres more that is broken up and extremely dangerous.

I drove a 10-kilometre stretch last week and I counted 90 potholes, Mr. Minister. Right now your crews are out hauling off the real big chunks of asphalt off the road and then they're throwing gravel over the rest of the road.

Is that the idea of fixing the highway? What are you really going to do to fix the highways in this area?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Mr. Sonntag: — Again, Mr. Speaker, I'd remind the member — I mean they'll be able to list highways as they have done — but I remind members that we've seen a huge increase in our Highways budget because we've identified that as a high priority. As a matter of fact, Mr. Speaker, in maintenance, we've increased our budget for maintenance 68 per cent in the last four years alone, Mr. Speaker.

If those members opposite in the 10 years when they were government, Mr. Speaker, if they hadn't created the public debt that they created with interest accumulating at \$2 million a day, can you imagine how many potholes we could fill without that amount of debt.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Maintenance of Highway 3 from Glaslyn to Turtleford

Mr. Allchurch: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, I want to bring to the attention of the Minister of Highways the condition of Highway 3 from Glaslyn to Turtleford. This highway is cracked so severely that the highway is actually spread out, which brings to the fact that the local residents are suggesting that maybe it should be looked at as being twinned.

Mr. Speaker, Highway 3 is the main highway into Turtle Lake resort area so it sees a lot of heavy traffic of vacationers to that area. It is also the main truck route for trucks hauling grain from eastern Saskatchewan communities through to Lloydminster. This heavy traffic has caused the road to rapidly break down. But because the heavy traffic load is so high, it should be a high priority in your department.

Mr. Minister, should people planning to vacation at Turtle Lake this summer be expected to forget about their vacation and lay some pavement?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Mr. Sonntag: — I think, Mr. Speaker, that that member and those members opposite should apologize when they raise that issue.

The Leader of the Opposition, Mr. Speaker, when he was in the federal House of Commons, spoke in favour of abandoning the Crow, and it's the exact reason that we have the problem that that member raises right now. It's the exact reason why we have

that problem, Mr. Speaker.

With the change of goods and services from road to . . . with the change of goods and services . . .

The Speaker: — Order. Order. Hon. Minister of Highways, to finish your answer.

Hon. Mr. Sonntag: — From the amount of noise coming from that side of the House, Mr. Speaker, it seems that it bothers them a little bit.

Mr. Speaker, when the member . . . the Leader of the Opposition was in the House of Commons, he spoke in favour of abandoning the Crow rate. And it's the exact reason that we have the problem that the member identifies.

There has been a huge transition of goods and services from rail to road and no wonder that the roads are in the state of repair that they are. When they speak in favour of branch line abandonment and the Crow rate no longer being provided, that's why we have the problem that the member raises.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Maintenance of Highway 339 from Avonlea to Stelcam

Mr. Stewart: — Mr. Speaker, Highway 339 between Avonlea and the junction of Highway 39 at Stelcam is another example of a highway needing attention from the Department of Highways. The minister and members opposite don't like hearing all of these examples but it's important they recognize roads are the basic infrastructure of this province.

And the poor condition of our provincial roadways are hurting other areas including agriculture, economic development, and tourism. Highway 339 is full of large potholes and chunks of loose pavement. It's travelled daily by several school buses and is the only ambulance route from Avonlea, Claybank, Bayard, Briercrest, and surrounding communities, to Moose Jaw.

In fact last Thursday the member from Swift Current blew out a car tire after hitting a pothole on this road near Briercrest. This pothole was flagged or I'm sure the minister would have already received this bill.

Mr. Minister, what are your plans for fixing Highway 339?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Mr. Sonntag: — Mr. Speaker, I want to list three or four items that I've done here but I'm going to do them together. But I hope the public of Saskatchewan is listening to it and I believe that they understand, with one auction sale, selling off 436 pieces of equipment.

They call day after day for fuel tax reduction, Mr. Speaker. They accumulated debt over 10 years, of \$10 billion, costing us \$2 million per day of interest costs, Mr. Speaker. Is it a wonder that we can't maintain the roads to the state of repair that they should be at, Mr. Speaker, with those factors coming together, Mr. Speaker.

And on top of that, Mr. Speaker, the Leader of the Opposition who spoke in favour, Mr. Speaker, in favour of the abolition of the Crow rate which has seen huge transition of goods and services, Mr. Speaker, from rail to road.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Maintenance of Highway 15 from Seaman to Highway 20

Ms. Harpauer: — Mr. Speaker, it's kind of humorous to hear the member opposite use road maintenance and Department of Highways all in the same sentence.

I would like to point out the very poor condition of Highway No. 15 in my constituency from Semans to Highway 20. My office receives numerous complaints about this highway, and like many others in rural Saskatchewan, it's very heavily travelled.

I have a copy of a letter that was sent to the minister from Kevin Gemmill, a salesman for CJVR Radio in Melfort. He travels more than 58,000 kilometres a year on Saskatchewan highways and is very concerned that he is constantly paying for car repairs due to the poorly maintained highways. In fact he wrote to the minister because his car was damaged after travelling on Highway No. 15 on May 2.

Mr. Speaker, the NDP government, over the last nine years, have not adequately maintained the highways of this province, and will they start playing catch-up and put Highway No. 15 on the priority list?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Mr. Sonntag: — Mr. Speaker, after they sell the highways equipment and after they accumulate the debt, all of a sudden they get smart about what should be done, Mr. Speaker. It makes no sense.

I ask the members also, Mr. Speaker, I ask them also if they've talked to their colleagues. Their colleague, the critic for Highways, the member from Cypress Hills, Mr. Speaker, says in an article of *The Leader-Post* on April 15, 2000. He says the following, Mr. Speaker, he even acknowledges and says:

However, there is only so much construction that the province can complete each year as long as the federal government refuses to contribute its fair share of twinning costs, Elhard said.

Mr. Speaker, I would suggest that they get together and talk to their Highways critic because I think he understands that we can't do it on our own, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Maintenance of Highway 6 between Minton and Ceylon

Ms. Bakken: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, my question is also for the Minister of Highways. Mr. Minister, a year ago a highway crew spent several months at Highway No. 6 between Minton and Ceylon. They surveyed the highway, they put up flags, and what little work they did was merely a

band-aid job. The areas repaired are already breaking down. You keep throwing more money at the problems but nothing is ever fixed properly.

Mr. Minister, No. 6 is a major north-south route. Many truckers use this route to and from the US. Today there are no shoulders left on this highway and the potholes are numerous, making it very dangerous when meeting semis. One school bus driver says she takes the grid road whenever possible because the grid is safer than the highway.

Mr. Minister, now at least 18 miles of No. 6 Highway needs to be completely rebuilt because of years of neglect. Mr. Minister, when are you going to rebuild No. 6 Highway?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Mr. Sonntag: — Mr. Speaker, to employees in the Department of Highways and Transportation and those out on the front lines, I hope they were listening closely to that question from that member.

This is the member who said that she was in favour of privatizing health care. Here's the quote, Mr. Speaker, from the *Weyburn Review*. She says:

Why are we not looking at having privatized care in Saskatchewan and keeping the money here if that's what we're going to do.

Mr. Speaker, that's what the member from Weyburn says. I suggest, Mr. Speaker, if that member feels that way about health care, it would not surprise me if that member feels the same way about highways and transportation, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Maintenance of Highways 44 and 31

Mr. Boyd: — Mr. Speaker, my question is for the beleaguered Minister of Highways as well. Mr. Minister, so far the questions from my colleagues have focused solely on one highway in their ridings. But sadly, most constituencies have several highways that are in need of immediate attention.

I want to mention two highways in my constituency. Highway No. 44 from Plato right through to the Alberta border is a disaster. Strangely enough, when you reach the Alberta border, the highway becomes smooth and unbroken. The other highway is Highway 31 from Dodsland to the junction of Highway No. 21. This road has been neglected for years, but oddly enough every election since 1991, it has been staked as if construction is going to begin soon. But it's funny how those stakes disappear after I win the seat again, and again, and again.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Boyd: — Mr. Minister, when will highway construction begin on Highway 44 and Highway 31?

Hon. Mr. Sonntag: — I was going to say, Mr. Speaker, to the . . .

The Speaker: — Order.

Hon. Mr. Sonntag: — I was going to say, Mr. Speaker, to the member opposite is that maybe the reason he doesn't see stakes out there is because he's sold those off as well, but I actually don't see those on this list that they did sell off.

Mr. Speaker, there is 436 pieces of equipment, Mr. Speaker, that they sold on May 16 and 17 of 1984 at an auction sale. All of that equipment that disappeared, Mr. Speaker, then was sold. A very fateful day, May 16 and 17 of 1984.

Is it any wonder, Mr. Speaker, with equipment sold, with the amount of debt that's accumulated, Mr. Speaker, that we cannot maintain the road system as we should maintain it, Mr. Speaker?

And on top of that, if you add to that, Mr. Speaker, the fact that that opposition party over there has argued in favour of abandoning the Crow rate and the transition of goods and services from rail to road, Mr. Speaker, is it any wonder that our roads are in the state of repair that they are?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Maintenance of Highway 35 from Francis to Highway No. 1

Mr. McMorris: — Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. My question is to the Minister of Highways also.

Mr. Speaker, I have a concern from a constituent of mine and she writes:

Because the people of Saskatchewan are paying more and more for taxes and gas, the government should fix Highway 35 from Francis to the Number 1.

My parents were just driving on this part of the highway on June second and found that it would have been far easier to drive in the ditch (than drive on our highways.)

The pot holes are being filled but never packed and the pavement is breaking away.

Maybe it will take an accident to make this NDP government take fixing the highways of this province seriously.

Mr. Speaker, I concur. I've driven up that highway and it is a true danger. Mr. Minister, is this your plan: until an accident happens on that highway we're going to wash our hands of it?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Mr. Sonntag: — Mr. Speaker, at today's . . . the amount that we invest in highways today, Mr. Speaker, we're investing as a province roughly 87 per cent of the amount of money that we collect goes back into highways, Mr. Speaker.

But I want to remind the public of Saskatchewan, as I've done in the past, Mr. Speaker, that at roughly \$700 million a year . . . \$720 million a year that we pay towards interest costs, amounting to about \$2 million a day, that represents roughly,

Mr. Speaker, 13 per cent of our entire budget that we pay toward interest costs. The third highest expenditure, Mr. Speaker, each and every year.

If you take the 87 per cent that we get from highways . . . or from fuel tax, add the 13 per cent that we collect . . . or I should say that we pay towards interest on the debt, that's 100 per cent, Mr. Speaker. That extra \$700 million, Mr. Speaker, we could do a huge amount of construction and maintenance on our highways each and every year.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Maintenance of Highway 40 East and West of Hafford

Mr. Weekes: — Mr. Speaker, since we're on the topic of highways, I'd also like to direct a question to the minister in charge of that department. Mr. Speaker, I would like to raise concerns about Highway No. 40. This stretch of pavement which runs east and west of Hafford is a growing concern for area residents.

Some kilometres west of Hafford have seen patchwork done on potholes, but it's certainly not enough to work . . . to make anyone more comfortable travelling down that highway. Residents of the area are questioning why it had to get so bad before any work is done.

The maintenance work lasts no time at all and in the mean . . .

The Speaker: — Order, order. I'm sitting close to the member asking the question, I can hardly hear him. I would ask all members to kindly come to order and allow the member to ask his question.

Mr. Weekes: — Residents of the area are questioning why it has to get so bad before any work is done. The maintenance work lasts no time at all and in the meantime the parts which haven't had recent maintenance gets worse and worse.

Mr. Minister, will the residents of Hafford see major repair and construction work done on Highway No. 40 this year?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Mr. Sonntag: — Mr. Speaker, here in Saskatchewan we have more roads and highways than Alberta and Manitoba combined, Mr. Speaker. As a matter of fact, we have more roads here in Saskatchewan than Ontario does with almost . . . with over 9 million people.

Mr. Speaker, each day they come into the House here, Mr. Speaker, with petitions calling for a fuel tax reduction. And each day they ask us, as they've done today, Mr. Speaker, spend more — spend more on roads, spend more on maintenance, spend more on construction.

Mr. Speaker, I hope the public of Saskatchewan is listening to what these members are saying because the formula that they prescribe for us today is absolutely impossible, Mr. Speaker, absolutely impossible.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

ORDERS OF THE DAY

WRITTEN QUESTIONS

Mr. Yates: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Being an open and accountable government, we'd like to table the answer to question 161. We're extremely happy to do it, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: — The answer to question 161 is tabled.

SEVENTY-FIVE MINUTE DEBATE

Farm Families Finish Seeding 2000 Crop

Mr. Harper: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. At the conclusion of my remarks this afternoon, I'll be moving the following motion:

That this Assembly commend Saskatchewan farm families for their determination and resoluteness in the face of last year's adversity as demonstrated by the fact that nearly all of the year 2000 crop has been seeded in near record time.

Mr. Speaker, spring is a special time for us all. But springtime is very special for farmers. As farmers have such a close relationship with the land and mother nature, you can gauge, you can gauge the readiness of spring by the activities of farmers.

And this usually happens fairly early in the whole process, Mr. Speaker. As early as February in many cases you'll notice farmers start to move around and start to do their business of preparation for spring seeding, gathering the seed, new seed if they're prepared to use new seed that year, or maybe even taking some of their own seed to the cleaning plants and getting it cleaned and getting it on all preparations ready for spring seeding. Then they'll be bringing in their supplies such as fertilizer and herbicides, etc., that they'll be using for springtime.

And as the sun warms and the snow melts and the land greens and springtime sets in, you'll see the increased activity of farmers. And I've often believed, Mr. Speaker, that if we had the opportunity to take a bird's-eye view of the province of Saskatchewan from corner to corner to corner to corner during that time in the spring seeding when all farmers in this great province of ours are out doing their thing, I think it would make a tremendous, a tremendous videotape of . . . choreographic videotape that nobody else could describe.

Because you can just imagine the farm machinery moving in different directions, doing different jobs, each farmer doing his own thing in his own way; it could even be set to music, I believe, Mr. Speaker, because I think it is something of beauty — real beauty — real beauty, Mr. Speaker.

And, Mr. Speaker, the time of the spring is one of two particular seasons in the farm life and farm economy when the farm family really pulls together.

The seeding is a family operation. And it's not something that's just done by the farmer himself, but it's done by the entire family. And in many cases the teenage children are very much involved in the preparation of the land and operating of the farm

machinery.

But I think there's also, Mr. Speaker, a part of that family farm and farm family that is an unsung hero in many cases and that is the spouse in many cases, the wife of the farmer.

She is often overlooked but plays a very, very important role in the whole process. Mr. Speaker, the wives of farmers have always played the traditional role of preparing the meals and taking the meals in many cases out to the fields and keeping the farmers and hired men fed and energized for the long hours that they put in.

But as circumstances of farming has changed so has the role of many of the farm wives. In many cases, Mr. Speaker, many of these wives are also involved in off-farm income and off-farm jobs. This increases their stress and increases their role in the family farm operation at seeding time because not only do they maintain their off-farm income and off-farm jobs but they also maintain the family life at home, preparing the meals, and seeing to it that there is lunches and so on ready for the farmers. In many cases these women come home after a long day at the job site and they still have their supper to make and supper to take out to the field.

So I think in many cases we overlook the importance that women play in today's farming opportunities. And as a result of that, Mr. Speaker, we I think miss out on a very valuable part of the importance of farming today because it is no longer just a one operation — the farmer doing it. But it is truly a family operation, particularly in those operations that are quite successful.

And as we notice, Mr. Speaker, that over the last number of years, and I will say the last 20 or 30 or 40 years, we've seen significant changes in agriculture. We've seen our farmers meet many, many challenges.

The challenges of diversification is one that they have met head-on, and I'm proud to say that Saskatchewan farmers, which are by the far the most efficient farmers in all of the world, have met these challenges in a very, very head-on way. And we are seeing, as we drive through the great province of ours today, Mr. Speaker, a number of crops that we would have only imagined be grown 30 or 40 years ago.

We have moved away from the traditional crops of wheat, oats, and barley to diversify to chickpeas and lentils and a number of other crops, Mr. Speaker. And I believe that many, many of our farmers have diversified to the best of their ability, and they should be commended for that, Mr. Speaker, because they've met those challenges head-on.

They've met those challenges head-on while facing obstacles that are beyond their control. And those obstacles primarily, as we have seen, has been farm subsidies in other farming nations such as Europe and the United States, farm subsidies by their federal governments — their parent governments — that have put our farmers for the most part at a disadvantage.

But our farmers have rallied to that by meeting those challenges, and I would like to say that also, Mr. Speaker, our communities have rallied to that. In some cases we have seen

farmers as individuals do the diversification. But we've also seen communities diversify. We've seen construction of hog barn industries across this province.

But I would also like to draw attention to one community in particular, Mr. Speaker, and that's the community of Norquay, that about 10 years ago or thereabouts — 8 to 10 years ago — looked at the farming situation, and also looked at the fact that they believed that they needed to do something to diversify the farm economy in your . . . in their area, and to do something to encourage young people to stay at home, in their community, whether it be on the farm or in their small communities.

So they looked at an alfalfa processing plant. There was a group of individuals who studied the options, went through all the hoops, went throughout the community, raised money, and made an investment in an alfalfa processing plant.

Well, Mr. Speaker, that processing plant is running very successfully, is operating in Norquay. And today I believe that they're looking at processing about 36,000 acres of alfalfa in that area.

That particular plant has about a million and a half dollar payroll into that community. It creates full-time jobs, year-round jobs of at least 50 for people who work at that plant year-round. And seasonal workers, another additional 30 seasonal workers are hired on from spring to fall.

(1430)

So, Mr. Speaker, what that plant has done, it has provided economic opportunity right within the community by creating 50 to 75 jobs, but it's also offered the opportunity to our farmers to diversify into growing alfalfa.

And, Mr. Speaker, that is very important because that is what is required if we are going to pursue the opportunity of diversification in our province here, which is absolutely essential, Mr. Speaker. Because that is what we have to do as farmers.

We have to as . . . Farmers have demonstrated their ability to recognize their needs, to recognize that agriculture is changing, that no longer does agriculture suffice to say that we can survive on growing wheat, oats, and barley, the traditional crops. Because circumstances have changed and so has the atmosphere around agriculture.

And we've seen that the low commodity prices and high input costs of the traditional cereal grains are driving farmers to look at other ways of making their farm operations viable. And we're seeing our livestock in particular expand in this country.

And I can attest to that, Mr. Speaker. And I will draw attention to a gentleman who farms north of Stenen, a gentleman by the name of Allan Ball. Allan is a young farmer. I say he's young, Mr. Speaker, because he is a year or two younger than me, and I'm quite young. In fact I went to high school with Mr. Ball.

And Allan runs an extensive livestock operation. He runs about 175 bred cows. And this is a family farm operation. He's primarily in charge. He has two sons in university, who when

school is out they're out some of them helping him.

But Allan was . . . I was talking to him here just the other day and he was expressing his gratitude for the announcement by the provincial government this spring of reducing the gas tax because he was one of many farmers who used extensive amounts of gasoline.

I know that the members opposite will suggest that that was a waste of time and a meaningless program, but that's not necessarily the case. I mean, yes, Mr. Ball does run a lot of diesel powered equipment, but he also burns a lot of gasoline primarily because of his extensive cattle operation. He uses gasoline powered equipment, particularly trucks, in the movement of bales and the feeding of his livestock.

And he was telling me that he has always exceeded the limit of the gas tax cap previously and now he'll be able to benefit from that. So he was quite excited and quite pleased about it, Mr. Speaker, because now he believes he'll be on a level playing field with others.

And I had the opportunity also, Mr. Speaker, here, a couple of weeks ago on the long weekend, took the opportunity to travel out into the rural areas and just stopped in to some of the coffee shops and to talk to some of the farmers that were in there doing the same as I — having coffee.

And one of the gentlemen I talked to in Norquay was a gentleman by the name of Tim Derkatch. Tim is a young farmer. Tim is probably 35, 36 years of age. Tim, this year, seeded about 3,300 acres into crop. And Tim is one of those who has diversified. He is not just growing wheat but he's growing a number of other crops.

But Tim is . . . I had a nice long chat with him and he wanted to take the opportunity to express to me and through me to the government his appreciation for all the work the government put into this spring finding financial assistance for farmers because he was one of those who was experiencing some difficulty, experiencing some difficulty in finishing paying off last year's bills in order to receive credit and operating lines for this forthcoming year.

And he was very, very appreciative of the billion dollars that the Saskatchewan government had been able to negotiate with the federal government and put together to assist farmers like him to be able to see their way through, to be able to . . .

The Speaker: — Order.

Mr. Harper: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. And the point of that program, as you know, Mr. Speaker, was the Saskatchewan's continued . . . Saskatchewan's continued participation in AIDA (Agricultural Income Disaster Assistance), which was for 1999, which meant cash flow money for farmers straight through to this spring.

But equally as important, Mr. Farmer . . . Mr. Speaker, and I think equally as important for many, many farmers was the fact that the Saskatchewan government had been able to work out a deal with the federal government to instate a \$260 million from the transportation cost adjustment program. This money flows

straight through, Mr. Speaker, to farmers and it's flowed through at a very rapid pace.

So farmers, once the program was in place, simply, for those who were in NISA (Net Income Stabilization Account), simply had to . . . simply received a form from Crop Insurance, which they verified, signed, sent back, and in very short order got a cheque in the mail. This was very helpful. This gave farmers something they were desperate for, and that is a cash flow, some real cash money in their hands to service their debts with.

But equally as important and equally as appreciated was the negotiations that the provincial government was able to carry out with the federal government to get the federal government to agree to establishing a \$400 million available under the spring credit advance program, Mr. Speaker.

That gave farmers the ability to take credit. Basically it's a cash advance against this year's crop and they were able to secure operating lines of credit, or able to secure some commodities from their suppliers and so on and so forth, and use this money interest-free, Mr. Speaker.

And that's the key — interest-free, Mr. Speaker. They got that money in the spring and they don't have to pay it back or pay any interest on it until this fall. So I think, Mr. Speaker, it is very meaningful and very, very helpful to our farmers.

And I know it is because I've had them express that very, very sentiment to me, myself, here just two weeks ago when I was out in Norquay in the coffee shops there speaking to some farmers. And I found it interesting, Mr. Speaker, that it wasn't just the young farmers that was expressing this interest and this gratitude — it was also the older farmer too.

Because although the older farmers for the most part were fairly financially secure and perhaps weren't those in need so desperately of the money, but they recognized the plight of many of the younger farmers. And they were very anxious to see that that happens to assist those younger farmers in being able to secure product and securing operating lines of credit.

So with that, Mr. Speaker, I would like to move the following motion:

That this Assembly commend Saskatchewan farm families for their determination and resoluteness in the face of last year's adversity, as demonstrated by the fact that nearly all of the year 2000 crop has been seeded in near record time.

Seconded by the member from Prince Albert Carlton. Thank you.

Mr. Kowalsky: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, it's indeed a great pleasure for me to stand here today to salute our farmers. To salute, Mr. Speaker, the concept of farming. To salute the spirit of farming, and all of it that the word farming represents. Farmers who are working sometimes with nature, Mr. Speaker, sometimes against nature — working to earn a living.

Mr. Speaker, I want to salute the farm family. And that includes all farm families, and that includes my family, Mr. Speaker, and

that includes my neighbour's families, and it includes, Mr. Speaker, all members of the family as was very well alluded to by the member from Regina who just spoke previously on this motion.

Mr. Speaker, many of us in this Chamber are products of agriculture in some way or other. My career started on the farm. Farming paid for my education. Farming is ingrained in my values. Farming taught me the value of work. Farming taught me the value of working with farmers, taught me about co-operation.

And today I want to speak about the spirit of farming. And I want to give a single person's perspective of how farming has affected our lives, how it's affected our thinking — how farming still affects our thinking.

Mr. Speaker, I taught . . . not only did I grow up on a farm, I taught in farm communities. There was a short period of time in my life when I spent working in agriculture as a hail adjuster. Farming, basically, is in our blood, Mr. Speaker.

In my case, there are five generations of farmers in Saskatchewan in my family starting with my great-grandfather who came here with his son, my grandfather, from Ukraine. I don't know how many generations of farmers there were before them.

But throughout the five generations starting with my great-grandfather and leading through to my brother and his son, who is now getting into farming as well, I've noticed that even though some ideas change . . . the methodology changes, but there is a few things that are constant. One, Mr. Speaker, is the love of the land. Another is just the smell of the fresh tilled earth. We still enjoy that scent, Mr. Speaker, when we go out into the garden and like to put our hands into the dirt. Just sometimes . . . I know with getting the idea of the plants to grow, but just a good feeling and the nice smell of good Saskatchewan earth.

Or whether, Mr. Speaker, other things are constant. The satisfying feeling that you get from raising livestock, all the way from breeding through birthing right through to feeding, whether it be a . . . whether it be beef, or chicken, or some of the more diverse animals that our farmers are diversified into.

But after all of that, Mr. Speaker, being on a farm you work like the dickens but after doing a day's work, farmers usually can sleep soundly. And I want to congratulate the farmers that I've known, that I've worked for, and that are still working for their spirit and for knowing always that by pulling together they can bounce back.

It was the farmers of Saskatchewan who really do lead the way when it comes to inventing and creating — all the new machinery we've seen developed right here in Saskatchewan; new crop varieties that we saw developed right here in Saskatchewan through the generations.

Machineries that . . . some cases have developed and now is even extinct. I think of something called the rod weeder, Mr. Speaker, which we used to see back in the '50s and '60s, and I rarely see something like that now.

But at all times they're grappling with the elements, whether the elements are wild oats or frost, or hoppers at one time, or insurance systems or international subsidies. There are always some elements to grapple with in farmers. It's a little bit like politics — it never ends, Mr. Speaker.

But our farmers have determined to make a go of it. Our farmers have determined to do what it takes, and they've resolved to see the work that is done, and they are always planning for next year.

Farming is a bit of an adventure, Mr. Speaker. My great-grandfather and his twelve-year-old son, my grandfather, immigrated to the Radisson area — unfenced prairies, just surveyed, unbroken prairies. They had very few possessions; they'd scraped enough just to get to Canada, to be able to buy a cow or an ox at that time.

Farming in those days, Mr. Speaker, was labour. But for my grandfather and his father and their families, it meant freedom. It meant ownership. It meant being a master in your own yard. It meant no more crop sharing. It meant no more beholding to land barons. It meant no more fear of oppression. But instead they were free to build the schools and the roads. They were free to earn a living and not to beg on somebody else's benevolence.

The member says where did they come from? My grandfather came from Ukraine but it wasn't known as Ukraine at that time. I believe it was known as Galicia.

Mr. Speaker, this was how the West was won, how Canada was won. And I salute that spirit, Mr. Speaker, today — the spirit of those pioneers.

Mr. Speaker, the value that my great-grandparent's generation brought — freedom, respect for law and order, respect for good government, respect for education, and respect for honest work — in order that they would make . . . and they came here in order that they would make things better for their family. These values endure to this day, Mr. Speaker, and we owe it to the land and we owe it to farming.

(1445)

I recollect, Mr. Speaker, my grandfather in his late years — this was in the '70s — said to me, you know, farmers weren't . . . farmers are respected now, he said. This was in the '70s. Farmers are respected now. It wasn't always like that, he said, but we came here because that's what we knew how to . . . what to do. And that's why they embraced education, Mr. Speaker; so that their children wouldn't suffer the indignities of farm labour as their previous generations did. Mr. Speaker, I want to salute these people who brought dignity to farming here in Saskatchewan.

And when I think of the spirit of my father's generation, my father was born in 1914, he loved to work; he loved to play. He loved to tell stories, and he loved to joke — very much like many of his generation.

Having been trained on the horse and buggy, he went through a transition from horses to steam to gasoline; through the

depression, back to horses; passed the depression onto gasoline and diesel; from the combine from sheaves to swathing.

It was in his generation that things like 2,4-D and DDT (dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane) were introduced. It was his generation that learned to drive motorized vehicles. And it was his generation that learned to repair farm machinery, going from blacksmithing to machining, Mr. Speaker.

They grew up in an age of scarcity, Mr. Speaker. They hated to see waste; they hated to see squander. But they were generous in spirit.

They were suspicious of slick business, Mr. Speaker. For example, my father rode with his cattle on the train all the way to Winnipeg to make sure that they got there safely so that he could collect the cheque.

I remember, Mr. Speaker, however some things that don't change. Back in the '60s during one of the political elections, I was a teenager, went to the town hall; the candidates were all there. Guess what one of the topics were? What's going to happen to the family farm? And we stood up, and we were each all making our statements.

Mr. Speaker, ever since then you still have the same concept going on. What's going on to the family farm sometimes has changed a bit — now we talk more about what's happening to farm families.

The image maintained though, Mr. Speaker, the image of my father and his generation in coveralls, quite often in greased coveralls, leather boots, but they were people who did their job well. And, Mr. Speaker, they overcame their hardships.

Today it's a lot different, Mr. Speaker. Today farming is more like a business, and the problems are different. They have to deal with things about . . . like genetic, genetic modification, see and seed, Mr. Speaker. They have to understand words like bases when they're dealing with marketing. They have to deal with the largest corporations in the world like Monsanto and New Holland.

But it's still, Mr. Speaker, a family business, and I salute those people today who are working in this complex environment. They need to be congratulated, they need to be admired for the job that they do, Mr. Speaker. That, Mr. Speaker, is what I call "The Saskatchewan Way."

We hear today about the third way, mentioned by Chrétien and Tony Blair. Mr. Speaker, when I look about what they say, balancing, balancing the right wing with the left wing that is what the farmers of Saskatchewan have always done. That is known as "The Saskatchewan Way," Mr. Speaker. It is not the third way — it is "The Saskatchewan Way." And they got it from here because it started right here in Saskatchewan.

The Speaker: — Order.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Ms. Harpauer: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I find it rather incredible that the members opposite decided to initiate a debate

that I feel they don't know a whole lot about.

It simply amazes me that time and time again, the members opposite have attempted to whitewash the fact that there's an agricultural crisis in this province. It appears that they are naïve enough to believe that they can simply speak it out of existence and it's going to go away by saying that there is no longer a problem. And I find that arrogant, I find it short-sighted, and I find it disrespectful to the farmers of this province.

They obviously have no comprehension, they have no vision, and they have no idea of what's going to happen in this province when the agriculture industry comes crashing around their ears.

The farmers of this province need a lot areas in their industry reviewed and addressed to make agriculture sustainable in this province, Mr. Speaker. They need the rampant rising costs of input addressed; they need the transportation issues addressed; they need the stranglehold that the Wheat Board has on them that prohibits value-added processing addressed; they need the restrictive and costly interprovincial trade barriers addressed; they need the crumbling highway system in this province addressed; they need the international subsidies on agriculture products addressed; and they need the high SGI (Saskatchewan Government Insurance) and rural utility rates addressed.

They need this country's unsustainable cheap food policy addressed; they need the unfair and ridiculously high levy of education taxes on their farm lands addressed; they need the insanely high and well-hidden taxes on their input costs addressed; they need the never ending user fees charged by the Department of Agriculture addressed. And first and foremost they need a long-term safety net program that's effective, that's fair, and that's affordable, and they need that to be addressed.

They certainly, Mr. Speaker, they certainly do not need another warm and fuzzy statement by this government that is absolutely meaningless, and it's totally ignorant to what's actually happening to agriculture in this province. The only thing that I could agree with the member opposite's motion is that we should commend the Saskatchewan farm families for their determination and resoluteness. But the statement should end with something like, in spite of the fact that this government has done to totally destroy the industry in this province.

Where on earth do the members opposite think that the money came from to put this year's crop in? Please do not suggest that it came from the large, profitable CSAP (Canada-Saskatchewan Adjustment Program) that they brag about. And please don't suggest that it came from the huge profits of the sales of last year's crops.

I suggest to you, Mr. Speaker, and the members opposite, that in many, many cases the monies came from the farmers' savings and their NISA accounts. There was one last hope, one last chance.

And in even more cases, Mr. Speaker, I suspect that it's on the line of credit granted to these farmers from the grain companies -- the Cargills, the ConAgras, the Wheat Pools, and many more grain companies. If the truth was known, Mr. Speaker, I would guess that well over half of the seed that went into the ground

this spring was paid for by the grain companies.

So what's going to happen this fall when all that money needs to get paid back? It's frightening, Mr. Speaker, when you have a member opposite who makes a motion that includes, and I quote, "in the face of last year's adversity."

Well that's scary, and they still do not get it. This was not just last year's little problem that's gone away here. It didn't begin last year and it sure as the heck didn't end last year. This is a full-blown, ongoing agriculture crisis that we have in this province, Mr. Speaker. And it's not going to go away until both levels of government wake up and address the issues that I mentioned before.

Mr. Speaker, I would like to inform the members opposite that this crisis did not begin last year. Farmers are passive. Farmers are peaceful. And most of all, farmers are optimistic as we've heard the term, next year's crop. But it took a lot of pressure for those farmers to stage a protest last fall and then carry it through into the spring. It took a lot of years of frustration, years of being beaten down, and years of disrespect and abandonment by this government.

The crisis did not start last year, and it didn't end last year, Mr. Speaker. It began in 1991 when this government came into power.

They tore up the GRIP (gross revenue insurance program) for their own selfish gain of balancing the books and padding their slush fund. They closed 52 rural hospitals. They allowed the highways to crumble to a deplorable state, and they downloaded the funding necessary for education onto the farmers.

And now they're looking at their final solution which is forced amalgamation. Now they get to take control; to take the reserve municipal funds; to download the responsibilities such as highways onto the property owners. And what a grand idea, Mr. Speaker, and let's just close the rural hospitals while we're at it.

But what's this going to mean to our province?

Mr. Speaker, my husband and I farm. We pay enough property taxes to pay for our own children's education plus another family with two children. We pay enough taxes on our fertilizer, chemical, utilities, machinery, and our income tax that last year alone we could support a family of five with an annual income of around \$25,000.

If we give up, if we walk away . . .

The Speaker: — Order. Order, please.

Ms. Harpauer: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. If we give up, if we walk away, who's going to backfill the tax dollars that we're paying that are going to be lost?

Mr. Speaker, the farmers are supporting an incredible amount of industries and businesses in this province. They support the grain handlers, the truckers, the machinery dealers, the machinery manufacturers, the hardware outlets, the fuel dealer, the retail stores. And that is just a few. I don't know the exact numbers at hand, Mr. Speaker, but . . .

The Speaker: — Order. I would ask members if they have an issue to debate to kindly . . . Order, please. Kindly take your conversations behind the bar if you have an issue to debate, and allow the member from Watrous to kindly be heard. Than you.

Ms. Harpauer: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As I said, I don't know the exact numbers off hand, but the agriculture industry generates billions of dollars in this province and they deserve more respect and more recognition as to their importance than this industry has for this province.

Who's going to pick up the tab when they're gone? And who's going to employ the thousands of people who are going to become unemployed in this province?

Mr. Speaker, the agriculture crisis is real, it's ongoing, and it's time that this government woke up to the fact and started to do something constructive and meaningful instead of just babbling warm and fuzzy little meaningless statements about agriculture.

Mr. Boyd: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Thank you for my colleagues. Mr. Speaker, I want to respond to the debate here that we have before us with respect to agriculture and how the government seems to want to somehow or another take credit for the fact that farmers have completed their seeding operations.

I want to remind you that farming has been in . . . farming has been taking place in Saskatchewan since the late 1800s and the crop has gone into the ground every year since then. And the fact of the matter is it has very little to do with you people opposite. In fact in spite of the fact that you are the government, the crop got seeded.

And the people . . .

The Speaker: — Why is the member on her feet?

Ms. Harpauer: — To introduce guests, Mr. Speaker.

Leave granted.

INTRODUCTION OF GUESTS

Ms. Harpauer: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my honour to introduce nine students who are in the east gallery. The teacher is Neil Derby, and the chaperone, Darlene Gross. They're from the Simpson School and I would welcome . . . or ask everyone to welcome them here.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

SEVENTY-FIVE MINUTE DEBATE

Farm Families Finish Seeding 2000 Crop (continued)

Mr. Boyd: — Mr. Speaker, the crop has been seeded every year since the 1800s, late 1800s when the province was broke up. And farmers every year since then have seeded crop year after year after year. And the reason is very simple — because they're eternal optimists when it comes to agriculture. They believe in seeding a crop.

But the problem is, from time to time they don't get to harvest a crop. It was seeded in . . . the crops were seeded in the thirties, in the dirty thirties, and yet farmers all — unfortunately — all across this province didn't get to harvest a crop then. And regardless of the fact whether you want to try and take some amount of credit for the fact that farmers are seeding their crop, you should be trying to do something for the farmers rather than putting these flowery resolutions before the legislature.

You should be, if the member from Regina that started the debate was truly interested in anything to do with agriculture, he'd be working on behalf of farmers with respect to things like the long-term safety net. Remember that? Remember that that you promised in the . . . in your Throne Speech just a few months ago? You promised that you were going to implement that before the end of this session. We haven't heard a word about it; not a single thing.

Is there any ideas you have at all when it comes to the long-term safety net that you promised in the Throne Speech? Not a word about that.

In addition to that, in addition to that, they promised, as I recall, they were going to put a special person in charge of discussing the future of agriculture in this province as well. We haven't heard a single word about that as well.

I also recall from the NDP government opposite, they promised a long-term safety net in the election campaign in '95. You promised a long-term safety net in the election in '91. We haven't seen it then.

The only thing that you've done for agriculture that the member from Saskatoon participated in was the removal of the long-term safety net program that was in place during that time. The long-term safety net that was in place at that time called the gross revenue insurance program. And farmers, the member opposite voted to destroy it, and she knows very well she did. And members opposite on all sides, all over there, voted to destroy that program. And the farmers of this province will never forget it.

And then they . . . when they start talking about support for agriculture when they start talking about support for agriculture, that's why the farmers of this province will never trust the NDP again in agriculture, will never support you; and that's why you haven't a single member on that side of the House, that represents more than 50 per cent of the people in their constituency, are from an agriculture base. They don't support you, they haven't supported you, and they never will support you again, I predict, for a long, long time because of the things that you've done in agriculture.

It reminds me back a number of years ago about what has happened in agriculture and you look at the member from P.A. (Prince Albert) talking about the past in agriculture; I want to remind you of some of the things that the people that support your party have gone through and discussed over the years.

(1500)

I remember when the concrete terminals were being built, the very first ones in Saskatchewan and I think the first one

probably was the one in Rosetown, Saskatchewan. And the NDP at the time stood up in this legislature and all across this province and said it was going to destroy agriculture, it was going to be the end of agriculture, we would never see the clock turn back, we were going to see people leaving all over the place, it was going to completely destroy agriculture.

And now what do we see? We see terminals being built all over this province by all of the different grain companies. Every single one of them is participating in that today.

And the National Farmers Union was saying that it was going to destroy . . . I was at the opening of that elevator, I remember very clearly. I was at the opening of the Cargill elevator in Rosetown and the National Farmers Union had a protest there. They protested, they had placards it was going to destroy agriculture, and everything else.

And then they had a barbecue. And so the grain elevator manager from Cargill, he went out and invited the National Farmers Union to be . . . to come in. And in spite of their objections, so-called objections, in spite of the fact that they were so opposed to it, they were the first in line for the barbecue when it comes to that. The absolute first people in line when it came time to take some good out of the day's events.

And the farmers of this province . . . Mr. Speaker, the member also talked about marketing. And that's where a lot of farmers are interested in that right now, Mr. Speaker. This government should be placing some emphasis on trying to help farmers market their crops rather than hanging on to the past when it comes to agriculture.

There's a very good reason why farmers all over Saskatchewan are growing specialty crops, are moving away from the traditional grains, and it's very simple. They have to try, they have to try and make things go in their farming operations and the marketing system that's in place today with the Canadian Wheat Board simply is not meeting their needs.

And that's why they're abandoning it as quickly as they possibly can and moving to other crops in an effort to try and . . . in an effort to try, I should say, try very much to maintain a positive balance in their farming operations.

The farmers of this province don't like living in the past with the NDP. They don't like living in the past of a marketing system that simply is not meeting their needs. And they never will agree to that kind of system again.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Boyd: — The NDP solution, the NDP solution in the past to agriculture crisis has been things like putting in place a land bank where the government owns the land in this province. A failed effort, if there ever was one, to try and gain control over the agriculture economy of this province. Didn't work then. We are still saddled with land bank land from the '60s and '70s that your government bought from the farmers of this province, driving up land prices for farmers that wanted to buy land and expand their operations.

And that's why, Mr. Speaker, the farmers of this province don't

support the NDP. It goes back a long, long time. There's never been any support in agriculture from you people. You have ripped out every kind of safety net that there ever was and farmers have not forgotten.

And all you have to do is look at the debate in the legislature this afternoon with respect to the highways system as further evidence of the decline of the support for agriculture in this province. The highways are in a terrible state of repair, and I would invite members on the opposite side to leave Regina or Saskatoon just once, take a tour of rural Saskatchewan and see the state of highways in this province — see the state of highways in this province.

You're talking about the amount of money that you're putting into agriculture in terms of fuel rebates. There's no fuel rebate in place right now; there's no fuel rebate in place. Yes you can . . . can you get it off at the pump right now, Mr. Minister of Finance? No you most certainly cannot. You most certainly . . . Is it a benefit for you today? Put your cash up.

It's the NDP's solution to everything — put your cash up now and we promise we'll give it back to you a year from now maybe. That's their solution all the way.

Just like your tax increase . . . or tax decrease as you like to call it. Reduce the taxes and put up the PST (provincial sales tax). That's been your solution to the tax problems that farmers and individuals all across this province — the veiled promise of support somewhere down the line for people in this province.

Farmers are saying to you that if you really wanted to help them, why didn't you put the fuel tax rebate in place right now? So instead of having to pay it now and hopefully get it back a year from now, they would have at least had some support for agriculture right now.

The so-called \$1 billion support program that you put in place, there was more of an effort to try and convince people in urban Saskatchewan that you were actually doing something. Four hundred million dollars of that was a cash advance on the crop that was just seeded in the last few days — \$400 million of it was just an advance.

So somehow or another farmers are supposed to benefit. They're supposed to be able to get money today on a crop that they just finished seeding, and in large numbers across this province many of them are worried about the crop that they just seeded. On the west side of this province, I'll have you know, it's very, very dry and farmers are beginning to worry about the situation with respect to no rain on that side of the province right now.

All up the west side, west central, right up through the northwest parts of this province there's a lot of concern in agriculture these days, and there's concern for very good reasons. This government has failed them in terms of a long-term safety net; they've failed them in terms of highways; they've failed them in terms of any kind of tax relief; they've failed them in any kind of support whatsoever.

And that's why, Mr. Speaker, the farmers of this province have given you people, and they will, I predict in Wood River, give

you once again a failing grade.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Ms. Lorje: — Thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker. It gives me great pleasure to rise and enter this debate. I want to start off by saying that I personally find it a tad offensive that the members opposite continuously go on about how they're the only ones with dirt under their fingernails, so they're the only ones who really truly represent farmers in this province.

You know, it sort of . . . it reminds . . . it's as if . . . they have . . . Following their logic through, they should not be able to comment about health care unless they're surgeons. Well, excuse me, it seems to me, it seems to me that all of us in Saskatchewan are in this together.

And I would just like to remind the members opposite that on this side of the House, while we do not have a majority of rural constituencies, we have two northern constituencies with many, many farmers in them. We have three rural constituencies — Yorkton, Meadow Lake, North Battleford. And we have four constituencies that are split urban/rural constituencies, of which one of them is mine — Saskatoon Southeast includes a significant portion of rural area in it.

Now I will say I know that there are about 50 or 55,000 farmers in this province. So the members opposite represent about 25 constituencies. They probably have on average maybe what? Two thousand farmers in their riding?

Now I did a head count; I will admit this. I went to my voters' list and did a head count, and discovered that in my riding there are exactly 117 farmers. So that's only 5 per cent of the number that the members opposite have, so they only have to listen to 5 per cent of my speech. All right?

But I just did want to say just for the record, as a city slicker, I'm standing here also representing some farmers — and I'm very proud of it.

Now, I think it's important that city MLAs talk about the farm crisis and about agriculture as much as rural MLAs do. Because if we're going to find some adequate solutions to the problems that are facing the agricultural industry in this province, it's going to take all of us working together. And the politics of hate and division and pretending that they're the only ones who know anything about agriculture simply won't cut it. We need to have the city folk as well as the country folk understanding what's going on here.

We need to be cutting through some of the myths that there are in agriculture. Myths that I will admit many of my constituents believe. Myths like farming is simple. Well we know it's not simple; it's an extremely difficult job. It's complicated. The farm machinery is very expensive. It is imperative that people know what they're doing.

Farming is a gamble, a gamble against the weather and against markets. Farming is not simple. I would suggest to you that the average farmer today needs to be a plant pathologist, a geneticist, a biologist, and a chemist; as well as a top-notch machinist.

Another myth about farming is that farming is serene. Well we all know that it isn't. It's frantic, it's frenzied, it's very hectic — people work extremely hard.

But there is a myth that we do need to address because it's an unfortunate reality. And that is the reality that the per cent of GDP (gross domestic product) in this province derived from farming is dropping. Our economy is becoming more diversified. We're seeing major expansion in mining, in the oil and gas sector, in manufacturing, and everything. And as that happens, we see also the per cent of GDP that is derived from farming is dropping.

When I first entered politics 20 years ago, the per cent of GDP that came directly from farming in this province was about 15 per cent. Nowadays it's down to 14 per cent. And so that argument, it seems to me, says, since almost half of the Canada's cultivated land is here in Saskatchewan; it is really important that we get the city folk understanding the plight in the agricultural industry and not further engage in these politics of hate and division.

Our farmers, I think, have met many of the challenges that the world has thrown at them. You know, we no longer have King Wheat dominating things. Farmers now are growing over 50 different crops. And they've diversified so that up to 10 million acres of crop now are coming from things like chickpeas and lentils and oilseed.

But unfortunately, farmers are still getting poor returns from their farming operations as a result of trade-distorting subsidies and the domination of multibillion dollar multinational corporations.

I'd like to just quote a few statistics for all members to be aware of. Three companies retail and distribute the bulk of Canadian gasoline and diesel fuel — something that farmers are dependent on. Three companies produce most of the nitrogen fertilizer. Nine companies make the pesticides for the farmers. Four companies are gaining control of our seed market and that, I think, we should be extremely afraid of. And three companies produce most of our farm machinery.

It's the same on the downstream side of the food production chain in Canada. Nine grain companies collect Canadian grain; two railways haul it, and we're making very little progress unfortunately in the matter of short-line railways. Two companies dominate the beef-packing sector, and a handful dominate the pork sector. And I'm very proud that Mitchell's Gourmet Foods, my neighbour in Saskatoon, is one of those companies.

Three large firms manufacture 87 per cent of the pasta in Canada; and four corporations mill 80 per cent of Canadian flour. Those are statistics, I think, that should give us all cause to pause.

Now I've talked so far about farming as if it's simply sowing something in the ground and taking it out. But we also have to recognize that we have a major cattle industry in this province — \$900 million in cash receipts annually in our livestock industry and we have, even there in the livestock industry, farmers have diversified so we now have 60,000 head of bison,

elk, deer, and wild boar.

Now the member from Watrous says that farmers don't need a warm and fuzzy statement about agriculture — they need real programs. I want to read into the record the real programs that were announced just this year in this year's budget, when our Finance minister announced a number of initiatives to reduce costs for farmers and encourage growth in Saskatchewan agricultural industry.

First of all, a reduction of the property tax on farmland. This is a two-year \$50 million program to reduce the property tax on farmland by 25 per cent. That's a substantive program.

Elimination of the provincial sales tax on all farm gasoline. Now granted they don't get it reduced at the pump, but it is reduced.

The Minister of Finance also announced ethanol-blended fuel initiatives — a five-year incentive to begin this year that will rebate to wholesalers a portion of the fuel tax on ethanol produced and consumed in Saskatchewan. Good news for King Wheat, I would suggest, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

As well, in this year's budget we announced the extension of the livestock and agriculture facilities incentive program, and this provides a rebate of the provincial sales tax on building materials used in the construction of livestock and horticultural facilities. And we're going to extend that for an additional three years. Good news.

We also have a forage conversion program. Saskatchewan Agriculture and Food will develop a program with the industry over the next few months to assist in the conversion of farmland to forage production. And that program will be developed and available in time for the 2001 seeding.

A couple of other things. Funding for new generation co-ops and creation of a livestock monitoring and disease surveillance program.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, Saskatchewan farmers have survived adversity; they have diversified themselves and I am . . .

The Deputy Speaker: — Order. The member's time has lapsed.

Ms. Eagles: — Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Mr. Deputy Speaker, unlike the members opposite, I am a farmer. I find it very interesting that the hon. member from Regina Northeast would commend Saskatchewan farm families for their determination and — I'm going to say resolve because I've never heard of this resoluteness before and I just kind of question it — in the face of last year's adversity. Nearly all this year's crop has been seeded in record time.

I, too, Mr. Speaker, would like to applaud all Saskatchewan farmers, but I'm going to give you, as Paul Harvey would say, the rest of the story.

We had adverse conditions last year. We have adverse conditions this year. In fact, Mr. Deputy Speaker, our adverse conditions started the day this government took power in 1991.

They tore up GRIP contracts and used the money to balance the budget. The Premier promised a long-term safety net. Well, it's been over eight years and we still haven't seen one.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, then RRR, Roy's rural revenge, really kicked in. They closed 52 rural hospitals, with possibly more closures coming. Mr. Speaker, what kind of an affect does this have on rural Saskatchewan?

When people have to drive to larger centres for health care, they do one-stop shopping. They buy their groceries, machine repairs, etc., in the larger centres. Meanwhile back in small-town Saskatchewan, grocery stores close, implement dealerships close, and pretty soon there's nothing left.

On top of this, Mr. Speaker, there's the conditions of the roads. People in rural Saskatchewan are travelling greater distances for services, and the highways are deplorable. In fact, Mr. Speaker, in the Val Marie area, the people are fixing the roads themselves, as we speak.

Mr. Speaker, when the members opposite brag about seeding being almost complete, it's like they think they can take credit for this, and all is well on the family farm. Mr. Speaker, I urge the members opposite to contact chemical and fertilizer dealers, bulk fuel dealers, just to see how much money they have out on the books.

And, Mr. Speaker, the age of the average Saskatchewan farmer is now 57 years of age. Mr. Speaker, these farmers would like to think about retirement but there is no way they can do it. Their children cannot afford to buy the land or machinery, and the parents cannot afford to turn it over to them.

Mr. Speaker, my son farms, along with my husband and myself. He also holds down a full-time job, and there is nothing he would love more than to commit himself to farming full-time. But with commodity prices where they are and input prices where they are, and with a growing family, there is no way possible for this to happen.

My husband and I cannot turn this over to him at this point as we have to have an income on our investment, and we also have a daughter. So in our area, we're doing what everyone else is doing, and we just let the kids have access to our machinery, and that is their only hope.

Mr. Speaker, this government couldn't care less about farmers or the agriculture-related industry. There have been many farm rallies, demonstrations here at the legislature. But did they dare show their face? No way.

Last December the legislature had a sitting to deal with the agricultural crisis. The official opposition asked the government to support farmers by way of a payout of \$300 million from the liquor and gaming fund, or what is presently known as the fancy slush fund.

Mr. Speaker, in the last vote of the old millennium, this administration said no to the farmers of this province.

And, Mr. Speaker, while I'm on the topic of lousy treatment of agriculture in this province, I must mention AIDA. What a

complete flop. Every day my office and the offices of my colleagues are flooded with calls regarding this disaster.

Generally farmers who rely solely on farm income don't qualify, while those with off-farm income qualify because they can have the inventory while keeping farm receipts down. What producers need is a payment based on acreage — fair to everyone because it is common knowledge that low commodity prices hurt everyone.

Programs like AIDA, and the fact that this government destroyed GRIP, are very evident in rural Saskatchewan. An election called in the middle of harvest hoping that farmers wouldn't take the time to vote. They did vote and they sent the NDP a strong message. While the former member from Watrous and former Agriculture minister didn't manage to keep his seat, the Saskatchewan Party harvested more votes in the election than either the NDP or the Liberals.

The Premier had a wedding and the Minister of Education was the bride. People were shocked; 60 per cent did not want this NDP administration to lead the province. Now we will get another chance to send a message on June 26 in Wood River.

Mr. Speaker, the Throne Speech promised the farmers of this province a long-term safety net. Farmers with their high input costs need something they can take to the bankers. We've been monitored and studied to death. No more empty promises. We need action and we need it now. Thank you.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Wartman: — Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I'm really thankful for this opportunity to give a congratulations to farmers. I am not a farmer. I am really happy though that farmers are as far along in the process as they are this year. I recognize that it's not all smooth sailing; that many of them are extended very far in terms of credit. But I do know that there's hope out there. I've talked to the great many farmers over these last months and there's a lot of hope.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I must say that over these last months, I found myself often quite disturbed by the narrow-mindedness that seems to come across the floor when it comes to the themes of agriculture. Many of us over here are not farmers, but many of us have a great deal of experience around farm communities, rural communities. And some of us actually have a fair bit of farm experience as well.

I would like to share with the members opposite a poem that I wrote. It is somewhat autobiographical but I hope you'll listen to it. It's not a big slam at anybody. It's just where I come from in terms of the agricultural issues, because I think it is important that we understand and empathize, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Am I A farmer?

I have no quota book.

I own no land.

But, I have touched the earth,
and the earth has touched me.

I have scratched the soil and planted the seed.

I've watched it grow and turn to gold.
With swather, combine and truck,
I have gathered the grain to bins
and shovelled and hauled it to elevator.

So am I a farmer?

I've tasted the soil and I've fed the soil.

I've branded the calf and I've wielded the knife.

I've been in 4-H and learned some skills.

I've raised a filly and trained her well.

I've herded cattle, milked cows, gathered eggs and fed the
pigs,

And yes, I've slaughtered, and butchered
and thanked God for the food.

I've battled barn fires and prairie fires.

I've ached and cried with family and friend

over losses no one should have to face.

I've written letters and called for help.

With compassion and pain, I've buried farmers:

men, women and children whom I have loved and cared
for.

I've prayed and sang and danced and worked and played
and lived with farmers for most of my life . . .

Am I a farmer? . . . no . . .

But yet, I may understand.

For I have learned, and I have compassion,
and I have always loved the land.

I touch the earth, and the earth touches me.

No, I don't have all the answers.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Wartman: — Thank you. I don't have all the answers. We don't. Nor do the folks in the opposition. But we are working to try and make sure that this farm economy thrives along with the rest of the economy.

We are putting in place, with the best of the resources that we have as a province, programs that have helped and will continue to help, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I am glad that farmers found the resources to pay off debt so that they could get ahead and plant again this year.

And I hope and I pray that the conditions will be right, that the markets will be right, so that the farmers of this province will have a future — a good future. And I will do what I can and I know the members in this caucus will do what they can to make sure that this whole province and every sector of our economy thrives.

We will do our best for farmers whether we have been elected by farmers or by city people. I am convinced of that and I am committed to that, Mr. Deputy Speaker. And I will thankfully — for all the resources — I will thankfully continue to learn about the issues of agriculture.

I've been so impressed by the willingness of the farmers in my constituency to help me out when I don't understand something. I use that telephone. I get on the phone and I call them. I ask

them for advice. There are farmers all through this province that I have known over many years, relatives and friends, that are willing to help me gain an understanding so that I can do a good job. And I work towards that deeper understanding all the time, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

The other thing that I am so thankful for is the Department of Agriculture with staff who have the resources, who have the knowledge and the ability to help us get a handle on these issues. When I've had questions that I didn't understand, I couldn't get a clear understanding from some of my farm friends, I'd call the department. There were briefings available. There were notes available. There were people who I could meet with to gain a deeper understanding.

There are times when I have learned from members in the opposition as I've listened to them talk.

The Deputy Speaker: — Order. The member's time has expired.

Members, according to rule 17(2), it says, and I quote:

At the expiration of sixty-five minutes, there shall be a period not exceeding ten minutes to be made available, if required, to allow Members to ask questions and comment briefly on matters relevant to the contents of the speeches and allow Members who spoke in the debate to respond to questions raised.

Mr. Boyd: — Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I would have a question for the member for Regina Qu'Appelle. It was a very touching and heartfelt, I think, poem that you've come up with. And I want to congratulate you from this side of the House.

However, while all that is well and good, the farmers in this province . . . And you will remember this, and I'm sure the farmers in this province remember this, that you made commitments to them in your last Throne Speech. One of those commitments was that you were going to put forward a plan, a vision — a long-term safety net.

I'm wondering, in your caucus and with discussions with the Minister of Agriculture, can you tell the farm families, and the people of Saskatchewan for that matter, when you'll be presenting that plan to the province?

Mr. Wartman: — Thank you for the question. I don't have a specific date. I know that work is going on in that venue. I know that there have been some very, very effective conferences. You, I think some of your members were a part of that conference in the fall looking at a focus. There are plans also underway and work is happening with the federal government as well to develop a good, strong, safety-net program.

But in terms of a date, we do not have a date that we're going to let the plans out. But we are . . . We will have a plan brought forward, and I'm confident that that plan will provide hope for the farm families, not just hope but substance that will enable them to move ahead.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

(1530)

Mr. Thomson: — Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. My question is for the member for Watrous. My question is: does the MLA believe that members who claim 35 cents a kilometre for government use on their vehicles should also take advantage of price-discounted farm plate and tax-exempt fuel when using their vehicles for MLA use?

Ms. Harpauer: — My vehicle is also used on the farm. However, I do not use tax-exempt fuel for my vehicle. I buy my fuel from the pumps and I have receipts to prove it. And I also claim it when I put in for the fuel rebate for the farm for my husband and myself.

Mr. Thomson: — Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. So the question is if a member is claiming 35 cents a kilometre to help to offset the cost of insurance of vehicles as well as wear and tear, should they also be taking advantage of the price-discounted farm plate when the vehicle is clearly used and marked as . . .

The Deputy Speaker: — Order, order. Members, I'm going to point out that under rule 17(2), this is an opportunity to allow members to ask questions and comment briefly on matters relevant to the contents of the speech, speeches.

Members, I was listening. I did not hear a direct reference to this particular matter. I'm ruling the question out of order.

Mr. Thomson: — Thank you. My question, I guess, should be perhaps more broadly phrased. I appreciate the admonition for that.

The question is one of fairness, and the question is: what are those things that can be done? And how do we make sure that the representatives in this House do in fact represent the people who elect them and not take advantage of special situation. Would the member care to offer a comment on that?

Ms. Harpauer: — No.

Motion agreed to.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' MOTIONS

Motion No. 9 — Decrease in Social Assistance Caseloads

Ms. Lorje: — Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. At the conclusion of my remarks, I will move the following motion:

That this Assembly recognize the continuing decrease in social assistance caseloads in Saskatchewan, and the reduction in child poverty in Saskatchewan in the past decade and advocate that high priority be given to further . . .

The Deputy Speaker: — Order. I apologize to the hon. member for Saskatoon Southeast. You cannot move the motion that is in another member's name. We are private members' motions.

Mr. Prebble: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. And my apologies to the member for Saskatoon Southeast.

Mr. Speaker, it's my pleasure this afternoon to move the following motion:

That this Assembly recognize the continuing decrease in social assistance caseloads in Saskatchewan, and the reduction in child poverty in Saskatchewan in the past decade and advocates that high priority be given to further steps to reduce poverty in our province.

And at the end of my remarks, Mr. Speaker, I'll be moving that motion, seconded by the hon. member for Saskatoon Southeast.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to begin my remarks this afternoon by saying a few words about the impact of poverty in our communities across this province and across the country, and the importance of making the kind of progress that our government is making in tackling poverty in Saskatchewan and the importance of continuing that work.

Mr. Speaker, I want to begin by quoting from a recent publication by the Canadian Council on Social Development entitled *Urban Poverty in Canada*. And on page 16 of that publication, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Canadian Council on Social Development says, and I quote:

Poverty is not simply a problem for people who have fallen on hard times. Its scope is much wider than that, and it should be a concern to all Canadians. Poverty rates are indicators of the health of citizens and the state of institutions. As well, poverty rates are predictors of things to come -- poverty has detrimental impacts on the long-term health of children. Unhealthy children will, in time, affect the health of the nation. Current poverty rates show that all sectors still have much work to do to address the problem of poverty in urban Canada.

And this report, Mr. Deputy Speaker, goes on to talk about how urban poverty in Canada is on the rise — in fact, sharply on the rise, Mr. Deputy Speaker; and that the number of metropolitan sectors, the number of neighbourhoods, urban neighbourhoods across Canada in which high concentrations of families are affected by poverty has escalated dramatically over the last couple of decades, Mr. Deputy Speaker, up 60 to 70 per cent in terms of the number of neighbourhoods that have levels of poverty in them that are double the national poverty rate.

And this has to be concern to all Canadians, and it's of great concern to me, Mr. Deputy Speaker. And I'll be making specific references to this report again later on.

But I come back to the fundamental point that this statement that I quoted from is making, and that is that poverty rates are really an indicator of the health of the nation, the health of our communities, and the health of our children, Mr. Deputy Speaker. And therefore any level of poverty is, in my mind, unacceptable.

Now I made reference in the motion that I'm introducing this afternoon that one of the things that we want to recognize is the progress we are making in this area as well as the work that

remains to be done.

And one of the areas of progress, Mr. Deputy Speaker, is a reduction in the social assistance caseload in this province, in fact a very significant reduction that I think members of the public and other members of the Assembly will find of interest. And I want to talk a little bit about the progress that's been made over the last six years.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, in 1994, in April 1994 to be exact, we had 83,013 persons in this province who were relying on the Saskatchewan Assistance Plan, in other words they were receiving social assistance. Today, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that has been reduced to 62,988 persons. So in other words a reduction of almost 20,000 people, Mr. Deputy Speaker. That's a very significant accomplishment by this government. And those almost 63,000 people live in just over 34,000 households to put that in perspective.

So we're looking at almost 20,000 less people relying on the Saskatchewan Assistance Plan today than did six years ago, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and that's a significant accomplishment.

And I might say, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that that comes in the face of a number of major changes in federal policy that have impacted on this province. And one of those of course has been the decision by the federal government to cut back Employment Insurance benefits to the point where we have a lot more people in Saskatchewan who would have been eligible a decade ago for Employment Insurance, but are now, because of the federal cutbacks, forced onto the Saskatchewan Assistance Plan, Mr. Deputy Speaker. So we've made this kind of progress even in the face of those federal policy changes. And I think that's a significant accomplishment.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, in all, we are now in a situation as a result of this progress over the last six years where we rank third best in Canada in terms of the numbers of persons who are reliant on social assistance in their province. About six and a half per cent of our population, Mr. Deputy Speaker, is dependent on social assistance. And as I say we are . . . we have the third best ranking in the country.

Also, Mr. Deputy Speaker, one of the things that I'm proud of is that our government has accomplished these decreases in numbers of persons relying on the Saskatchewan Assistance Plan without reducing benefits or forcing people off social assistance as many other jurisdictions have done, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

So these improvements have not been accomplished at the expense of those who are poor. These are improvements that have been made working with those who are poor and improving their lives, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

And that is very significant, and a very different approach from our neighbouring . . . from many of our neighbouring provinces including, of course, the province of Alberta, Mr. Deputy Speaker, who's taken, I think, a much more callous approach to working with those who are living in poverty in their communities.

Now, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to . . . I wanted to talk for a

moment about how some of these accomplishments have been implemented. And I want to begin by noting that one of the significant things that marks Canada from many other countries in the world is our medicare system. And I wanted to make just brief reference to this because our medicare system is not the reason why we've seen an improvement in the social assistance caseloads. We've had our medicare system in place for many years.

But it's a reason, Mr. Deputy Speaker, why those who are less fortunate in this country are still in a far, far better situation than they would be if they lived in a country like the United States.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, we heard in the Assembly earlier today that one of the reasons . . . we heard in the Assembly earlier today the consequences for families in the US that are not covered by medicare. And we had presented to us the statistic that 500,000 Americans file bankruptcy last year, Mr. Deputy Speaker, due to being unable to pay their medical bills — 500,000 Americans; 40 per cent of bankruptcies in the US are as a result of not having medicare coverage.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, that's something that can't happen to someone living in Saskatchewan or living in other parts of Canada. It's one of the very important things that differentiates us from our neighbours to the south.

Now, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to talk about some of the programs that we've launched in the last few years, as a government, that have improved the circumstances of those who are poor in this province. And one of the major accomplishments of this government, Mr. Deputy Speaker, is that we have reduced unemployment in the Saskatchewan economy very significantly.

And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, as a result of that, we have many more people who have an opportunity to participate in the economy now than was the case six years ago. And this progress continues even in the current year, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

I just want to draw the attention of all members to the fact, for instance, that if you look at our levels of employment in Saskatchewan in terms of full-time jobs between March of last year and March of this year, we have 17,100 more full-time jobs in this province than we had a year ago.

Well that's a very significant accomplishment. We also, Mr. Deputy Speaker, have an unemployment rate that is only 5.2 per cent in comparison with the national unemployment rate of 7.3 per cent. So our unemployment rate is consistently a couple of percentage points lower than the national rate. And that is also another significant accomplishment of the private sector and our government working together to keep unemployment in this province low.

(1545)

We have, Mr. Deputy Speaker, 478,100 people working in Saskatchewan — an increase over the same time last year of 15,000 persons. And we have 10,200 fewer unemployed people this year at this point in time, Mr. Deputy Speaker, than we did a year ago.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, it doesn't matter how you look at the problem, and I've just looked at it from four perspectives, we are making significant headway in this province under our NDP-Liberal coalition government.

Now, Mr. Deputy Speaker, in addition to the progress that's been made in terms of reducing unemployment and creating job opportunities for our residents in this province, we've also introduced a number of important redesign initiatives in terms of social programs that impact those on social assistance.

And some of the initiatives that have been taken include the introduction of the Saskatchewan Child Benefit, the introduction of the Saskatchewan employment supplement and the introduction of family health benefits for low-income people who do not qualify for social assistance but who are trying to make a living in the workplace, and who, prior to the introduction of the family health benefits, were not eligible for those benefits while people on social assistance were.

So we've extended family health benefits beyond those on social assistance to low-income working people. We've provided an employment supplement to low-income working families with children. And of course we've introduced the Saskatchewan Child Benefit. The combination of those three initiatives, Mr. Speaker, has been to remove another 1,500 people from the social assistance rolls of this province.

And, Mr. Speaker, those people, those families, primarily families with children, are all significantly better off financially than they were before the introduction of these programs. And I might say, Mr. Speaker, that when we — I'm confident that when we see the latest Statistics Canada poverty rates for this province, which reflect the introduction of these programs, we're going to see a further decline in poverty in Saskatchewan especially poverty among families with children.

Now, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to bring to the attention of all members of the Assembly that we're now in a circumstance in which there are over 40,000 low-income families who are receiving the Saskatchewan Child Benefit. Many of those are families of course on social assistance. But many others are not, Mr. Deputy Speaker. And 8,800 on-reserve families are receiving the Saskatchewan Child Benefit.

In addition, Mr. Speaker, we've got each month about 5,900 families in this province who are receiving the Saskatchewan employment supplement. And we've got 23,000 families with children who are receiving the family health benefits. So in total, Mr. Deputy Speaker, in these families there are 45,000 children receiving the family health benefits.

So we've extended these programs very significantly, and the introduction of the employment supplement and the introduction of family health benefits and their extension beyond persons on social assistance to other low-income working families is making a significant impact in this province, Mr. Deputy Speaker. So those are some of the initiatives that have been introduced.

In addition, when you're looking at why we've had that significant reduction in social assistance caseload, one of the things that one has to look at is what has been done in terms of

post-secondary training opportunities in this province, and for training and employment programs in general.

And here, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to bring to the attention of all members of the Assembly what the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development has said about our work here in Saskatchewan. The OECD (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development) in a recent review of social assistance programs in Canada, identified that Saskatchewan is committed to taking the best route to get people off assistance and onto employment.

And what is that best route, Mr. Deputy Speaker? Well first of all, Mr. Deputy Speaker, Saskatchewan does not endorse workfare which demands unpaid work in exchange for benefits. We don't believe in that approach, unlike many other provinces, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Rather, Mr. Speaker, we are working with people to make the transition to real jobs and real wages.

Clients on social assistance in this province who are capable of working want to work, Mr. Deputy Speaker. That's what we believe. And they are expected to pursue all opportunities for independence. Our government helps them take steps to overcome whatever barriers to employment they are encountering, whether these are social or educational.

Now, Mr. Deputy Speaker, in the fiscal year 1999-2000 Post-Secondary Education and Skills Training provided over 15,000 training and employment service opportunities for current or former social assistance recipients. And this, Mr. Deputy Speaker, has been part of the key to reducing the social assistance caseload in this province — it's been the extensive support that's been provided by Post-Secondary Education and Skills Training.

That department, Mr. Deputy Speaker, is also providing career and employment services for low-income people in 20 locations around the province. These are the Canada-Saskatchewan career and employment service centres. So clearly, Mr. Deputy Speaker, there's a lot happening on that front, a lot that doesn't often enough get public attention, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and of course that's part of the reason for the motion before us now.

And I want to just say that it's my view that education is a key barrier to overcome for many persons who are on social assistance. Approximately 70 per cent of all persons who are on assistance and who are believed to be employable by Saskatchewan Social Services have less than a grade 12 education, Mr. Deputy Speaker. And one of the goals of our government is to change that and support those people in getting a decent education and being able to get off welfare.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I also want to say that in addition to the employment supports that I've already mentioned, SIAST (Saskatchewan Institute of Applied Science and Technology) and regional colleges are also offering a variety of literacy and academic upgrading and adult education programs which I think have made a very important contribution to getting the caseload on social assistance down.

We've introduced the JobStart, Future Skills program which links training to employment by providing employees with . . . by providing employers with wage subsidy assistance for

on-the-job training or retraining or providing funding for quick skills training leading to employment.

And we have a very extensive apprenticeship program in this province, Mr. Deputy Speaker, where we're providing on-the-job and technical training leading to journeyman certification in 46 trades.

Now, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that is some of the work that is taking place. I think there's some other very important initiatives that our government is undertaking that I also want to make reference to that are making a difference. And one of them is the work that is being done by our community development units in the Department of Social Services. And these units are working particularly in Regina and Saskatoon and Prince Albert.

They're working with community-based groups to build their capacity to address poverty issues in their neighbourhoods. And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I think, in my home community of Saskatoon, of the work that the community development unit in the Department of Social Services has done in supporting Quint Development Corporation to launch many new job opportunities in the Pleasant Hill, Riversdale, Caswell, King George neighbourhoods, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

I think of the work that the Department of Social Services is doing in Prince Albert with the women against poverty group and the New Beginnings Co-op, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Work that's being done in those communities to provide housing for low-income families.

I think that the work that the Regina Department of Social Services unit is undertaking in terms of working with a women's bakery co-op in Regina, that is working in conjunction with the Regina Food Bank to better the lives of low-income residents in the city of Regina.

And those are just three examples, Mr. Deputy Speaker, of the kind of work that the Department of Social Services community development unit is doing to help low-income people improve their lives.

Now, Mr. Deputy Speaker, in addition to all those initiatives, in addition to all those initiatives, Mr. Deputy Speaker, there is also some important new work that the government has launched on the social housing front. And I want to particularly make reference to this, and I'm very proud of this new initiative that we're taking, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Because what we've seen in Canada in the last decade is basically the federal government pulling out of its responsibilities for providing social housing.

We used to have a circumstance in this country in which the federal government would pay for 75 per cent of the construction costs of new social housing, and the provinces would pay for 20 per cent of those construction costs, and municipalities would pay for 5 per cent. And unfortunately in 1996 Ottawa pulled out all their funding for new construction of social housing in Canada.

And one of the very positive initiatives in the budget that our provincial government introduced in March, Mr. Deputy

Speaker, is that we are saying in that budget that even if the federal government is not going to invest in social housing, we are going to invest in social housing. We'll do it without Ottawa. And we have announced that we are going to be spending another \$6 million in the coming year on new social housing construction.

And with the exception of the Government of British Columbia, we're the only government in Canada that is taking that course, Mr. Deputy Speaker. And I'm very pleased to see those steps being taken.

Five million dollars of that six million dollars, Mr. Deputy Speaker, is contained in the new Centenary Capital Fund, and the other million dollars can be found in the Department of Municipal Affairs.

So while it's not enough money because the federal dollars aren't there to help, we're willing to go it alone and work with municipal governments in terms of developing new social housing for low-income families in this province.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to make reference to two other initiatives that our government has taken before I talk about other steps that might be taken in the future to tackle poverty. And that is the . . . first of all the work that we've done in terms of reducing social worker caseloads so that social workers can spend more time working with those who are still on social assistance in the province.

And here, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to point out that since 1994-95 our government has been able to reduce social worker caseloads from an average of 210 down to an average of 170. And the caseload is still high, Mr. Deputy Speaker, but we're moving in the right direction. And what that's doing is it's giving social workers a little more time to work with high-needs clients. And we need to keep moving in that direction, Mr. Deputy Speaker, but we have made a start.

And I also want to say that we've made a start in terms of our initiatives around pay equity, and this is particularly important for women in the workplace. And where we've primarily made headway so far is in the public sector, in the Crowns, and in the health care sector in this province.

Those are three key sectors in which pay equity programs are being introduced which will result in women . . . in women's salaries in those sectors increasing, especially women working in low-pay jobs or women working in jobs where they were doing equivalent work to men but weren't getting paid at wage rates comparable to their male counterparts.

And so, Mr. Deputy Speaker, in many areas we're making headway. And to summarize, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we've reduced the number of people who are reliant on social assistance in this province by almost 20,000 in the last six years.

(1600)

And we've done that through a combination of introducing the Saskatchewan employment supplement and therefore boosting the income of low-income working people with children in the

home. We've done that, Mr. Deputy Speaker, through a variety of post-secondary training and employment opportunities. We've done that through significantly reducing the overall unemployment rate in the economy and significantly increasing the number of people who are working in Saskatchewan. We've done that, Mr. Deputy Speaker, through expanding pay equity opportunities for women in this province.

We have done that in a wide variety of ways. Not in any one . . . not through any one program, but through a wide variety of initiatives, Mr. Deputy Speaker. And we've done that by working with low-income people and the organizations who represent them in their neighbourhoods, particularly in urban Saskatchewan, to help them create new opportunities for themselves.

And the work that the community development units in Saskatchewan Social Services have done are important. And all of these programs together is what's made the difference, Mr. Deputy Speaker. And I'm proud of the progress that is being made.

Now, Mr. Deputy Speaker, some of this good work has begun to reflect itself in the statistics that the Canadian Council on Social Development is keeping in terms of rates of child poverty in the country. And the latest figures that we have from the Canadian Council on Social Development only unfortunately goes back to 1997. So we don't have the most recent statistics which I think, in light of the comments that I've been making this afternoon, will further improve the statistics that I'm about to cite.

But the significant thing, Mr. Deputy Speaker, is that Saskatchewan is the only jurisdiction in the country — the only jurisdiction in Canada — to reduce the level of child poverty in its province. And that's an important accomplishment, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

So I want to quote the record across the country because Saskatchewan, Mr. Deputy Speaker, in the decade from 1987 to '97, reduced the number of children living in poverty by 8 per cent. And that is clearly as a result of the initiatives of this government, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Meanwhile, Mr. Deputy Speaker, in Newfoundland, there was no reduction; in Prince Edward Island, there was no reduction; in Alberta, there was an increase in child poverty of 2 per cent; in New Brunswick, Mr. Deputy Speaker, there was an increase of 10 per cent; in Manitoba there was an increase of 11 per cent; in Quebec, Mr. Deputy Speaker, there was an increase of 30 per cent; in Nova Scotia, there was an increase of 41 per cent in terms of the rate of child poverty; in British Columbia, an increase of 78 per cent; and worst of all, Mr. Deputy Speaker, in right-wing Ontario under the Mike Harris government, an increase of 118 per cent in the rate of child poverty. Which really . . . my colleague from Moose Jaw says, shame. And I agree with him. That really is a shameful record, Mr. Deputy Speaker, because clearly one of the ways in which a government should be judged is the degree to which it's making progress on an important front like this.

Now, Mr. Deputy Speaker, having noted the progress that we've made, and the many positive initiatives that have been

undertaken, I want to turn my attention to the work that lies ahead. Because while we've made significant progress, we have a major challenge ahead.

And I want to go back to referring to the study by the Canadian Council on Social Development entitled, *Urban Poverty in Canada*, and talk a little bit about urban poverty in our own cities, and particularly my home city of Saskatoon, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

And I want to . . . I think all members of the Assembly should acknowledge the progress that we've made. But all members of the Assembly should also acknowledge the challenge that lies ahead and the severity of the problem that we still face particularly in our urban communities.

Now, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I just want to give three or four perspectives on that challenge that we face.

First of all, I want to note that we face a situation in which our poverty rate for children in this province is still at around 19 per cent, Mr. Deputy Speaker — still much too high. In my home city of Saskatoon, there are 12 per cent of the census management areas -- which basically is another way to describe a neighbourhood, Mr. Speaker -- 12 per cent of the neighbourhoods that have a poverty rate that is more than double the national average of poverty in the country. Now that's not nearly as bad as a city like Montreal where 30 per cent of the neighbourhoods have a poverty rate in the urban neighbourhood that is double the national poverty rate.

But 12 per cent is still very significant, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and in my mind, unacceptable. So we have 12 per cent of the neighbourhoods in Saskatoon with a level of poverty that is double the national poverty rate. We also, Mr. Deputy Speaker, have a situation in Saskatoon where 31 per cent of families with children, who have children under five, are living in poverty. And that in my mind, Mr. Deputy Speaker, is also very unacceptable and clearly shows that we face a significant challenge in the years ahead.

And that contrasts, Mr. Deputy Speaker, with an overall poverty rate in Saskatoon of 21 per cent. So clearly, poverty among families with young children is abnormally high. And I think one of the obvious reasons for that, Mr. Deputy Speaker, is the fact that it's very difficult for families to work full-time while they're raising preschool children.

And many of these families will be headed by a lone parent, a single parent, and it's almost impossible to hold down a full-time job and look after very young children at the same time, Mr. Deputy Speaker. And that's one of the reasons why we're seeing this very high poverty rate among families with preschool children.

We also face an unacceptably high level of Aboriginal . . . of poverty among First Nations and Metis people in our city — an unacceptable rate of poverty among Aboriginal people. And again, that same report has pointed out, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that poverty rates among Aboriginal people in our urban centres are approximately four times that of non-Aboriginal people. And again, this is an unacceptable situation.

So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to talk about some of the measures that I believe are needed . . . further measures that are needed in addition to the good programs that we've already introduced, that will be designed to further reduce poverty in our province and that ought to be implemented by the Government of Saskatchewan.

And before I . . . before I speak to those measures, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to put this in context by talking about what, what is the poverty rate in our province right now. What level of income do people need to earn in order to not be living in poverty?

And Statistics Canada defines poverty for a single person, living in a centre the size of Saskatoon or Regina, as being \$15,070 a year, and that's pre-tax income, Mr. Deputy Speaker. For someone living in a community the size of Prince Albert, the poverty level is \$14,965. So you need to be making more than that to be above the poverty line, and again that's pre-tax income.

For someone living in rural Saskatchewan, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the poverty line would be defined as \$12,142. And anyone earning less than that on pre-tax income would be living below the poverty line. So that puts the poverty line in context, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

And clearly our task in this province as a government is that working together — government working with the non-government organizations sector, government working with the private business sector, government working with our educational institutions — our objective must be to systematically reduce poverty levels in this province year by year. We should be setting targets and we should be measuring the progress on a consistent basis.

Now, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to turn first to talking about poverty among those who are disabled because approximately 30 per cent of Saskatchewan residents on social assistance are persons with disabilities.

And I believe the time has come in this province, Mr. Deputy Speaker -- and I'm speaking on behalf of myself here now and not on behalf of the government -- but it is my view, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that the time has come in this province to introduce a disability pension for all persons who have significant disabilities: physical disabilities, serious mental health problems, serious intellectual disabilities.

It's time, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that we had a disability pension in this province that guaranteed that every one of those persons was living above the Statistics Canada poverty line, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Anyone who is disabled in this province shouldn't have to live in poverty as a result of that disability, Mr. Deputy Speaker. And I think that's an important reform that the Saskatchewan government needs to bring forward.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Prebble: — Mr. Deputy Speaker, I also want to point out that I think one of our other high priorities needs to be to continue our work to reduce poverty among families with children, and especially families with pre-school children, Mr.

Deputy Speaker. So we need to further strengthen the Saskatchewan Child Benefit. We need to increase that for families on social assistance and for low-income working families, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

And I think we want to get to the point, Mr. Deputy Speaker, where we can get these families . . . If we can't get them to the poverty line, at least get them close to the poverty line, Mr. Speaker, by improving the Saskatchewan Child Benefit and the employment supplement to the point where these families are no longer living in the kind of dismal poverty that they often face particularly in our urban communities today. So that in my mind, Mr. Deputy Speaker, is another very high priority.

(1615)

And I want to then lay a number of other initiatives that I think need to be taken to reduce poverty in both urban and rural communities.

First of all, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to urge the government to expand and support neighbourhood employment . . . neighbourhood-based employment initiatives in low-income neighbourhoods with jobs targeted for residents of those neighbourhoods, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I believe there are many local neighbourhood jobs that could be created through initiatives such as home renovation, energy conservation, recycling, and repair services — just to give four examples.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, when I look at the Quint initiative in my home community of Saskatoon which as I said our government has strongly supported, the Quint initiative demonstrates the effectiveness of this kind of an approach. And this approach should be expanded and should be applied in many other low-income neighbourhoods across our province.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, for those who have limited transportation opportunities, work opportunities need to be created in their neighbourhood. And for many people who are on social assistance, they have limited capacity, Mr. Deputy Speaker, to travel to another part of the city to take employment. Their first employment opportunity may need to be in their home neighbourhood. They often don't have the money, Mr. Deputy Speaker, to travel, to take job elsewhere, even in their own city.

A lot of these people are just barely surviving, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and employment opportunities need to be created where they live, and once they have more financial wherewithal they'll be able to readily take a job in another part of the city. When they have more training opportunities, they'll be able to take a job in another part of the city or in another part of the province, Mr. Deputy Speaker. But often their first job needs to be in their home neighbourhood.

And I think we need to be paying attention in neighbourhoods that have very high rates of unemployment in this province — and there are several of them — we need to try to create employment opportunities in those neighbourhoods, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I think that would be an important initiative.

As I said, we need to increase the Saskatchewan Child Benefit. That is very important to do that both for low-income, working families and families on social assistance.

And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, in my view we need to implement strategic increases in rates paid under the Saskatchewan Assistance Plan. I'd like to see an increase in the Saskatchewan Assistance Plan allowance for food and clothing and personal items. I'd like to see the reinstatement of the travel allowance for social assistance recipients. I think those are two positive initiatives, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that I'm anxious to see our government undertake.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I'd also like to see an allowance introduced under the Saskatchewan Assistance Plan that gives those who are employable and on social assistance the resources that are required to look for work, including a clothing allowance, child care dollars, and a travel allowance to get to their place of employment.

And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I'd like to see our government introduce a series of increases in the minimum wage that would steadily move the minimum wage up to the poverty line.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Prebble: — And that, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I would argue that the minimum wage should be above the poverty line. There is no reason, Mr. Deputy Speaker, why someone who is working full-time in Saskatchewan should, after working 40 hours a week, still live in poverty, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Those days need to come to an end. And we need to increase the minimum wage, Mr. Deputy Speaker, to at least the poverty line.

And what that means, Mr. Deputy Speaker, is getting it over \$7 an hour — that's basically what it means, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I think the time has come to do that. And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I think that should be one of the high priorities of our government in the term ahead.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, we also need to continue to expand social housing programs in this province. One of the things that I'm very proud of is that in Saskatchewan we have 33,000 social housing units — now that's quite an accomplishment, Mr. Deputy Speaker, but we need more. We need at least another 20,000.

The unmet need in terms of social housing in this province is at least 20,000 — probably more like 30,000, Mr. Deputy Speaker — and we need to continue to expand social housing in the province of Saskatchewan, and not only for low-income families but also for low-income seniors, Mr. Deputy Speaker, will be a very important initiative.

And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I believe we need a major initiative in this province aimed at getting children who are not attending school back in school. In Saskatoon we have at least 300 children, aged 8 to 13, who don't attend school on a regular basis, and hundreds of more who are dropping out. These are . . . and hundreds more who are dropping out without completing grade 9.

And many of these children are ending up, Mr. Deputy Speaker, getting into trouble with the law or ending up on the streets. And it's time to launch a major initiative in this province to help those children, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

And I'm very proud that our government set up . . . One of these groups of children of course is children who are being sexually abused on the street. They are a small portion of the overall group of children who are out on the street, but they are a very high-needs portion of those children. And I'm pleased that our government has set up a special legislative committee to address the needs of these children, which the member for Humboldt and myself are co-chairing, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

And I'm looking forward to our province making headway on this issue as a result of the joint party work that is going on in this legislature on this important issue.

But beyond the specific needs of children who are being sexually abused on the street, there's a much larger group of children who are very high needs and very high risk who are . . . they're not involved in . . . they're not being sexually abused on the street, Mr. Deputy Speaker, but they're spending too much of their time on the street.

They've dropped out of school. They're engaged in break and enter and car theft and other illegal activities, and they have little prospect of a promising future ahead of them unless we get them back into school, get them training, get them off the street, and give them both educational and job opportunities, Mr. Deputy Speaker. And this must be one of the major priorities of our government in the coming term in my view.

So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, those are some of the additional initiatives that are needed, in my judgment. And I want to close, Mr. Deputy Speaker, by turning the attention of the Assembly again to the motion before us.

And that motion, Mr. Deputy Speaker, is:

That this Assembly recognize the continuing decrease in social assistance caseloads in Saskatchewan, and the reduction in child poverty in Saskatchewan in the past decade and advocate that high priority be given to further steps to reduce poverty in our province.

And Mr. Speaker, in summarizing my comments in this area, I just want to say three or four key things in summary.

First, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the motion speaks to the continuing decrease in social assistance caseloads. And we have seen between 1994 and the year 2000, an increase of almost 20,000 persons relying on social assistance in our province, as a result of the initiatives of this government, Mr. Deputy Speaker. And I hope that's something that all members of this Assembly will applaud.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Prebble: — Secondly, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we are the . . . Saskatchewan is the only province in Canada, the only province in Canada, to reduce child poverty in the decade that we have the most recent statistics for nationally — between 1987 and 1997, an 8 per cent reduction in child poverty in this province, again as the result of the initiatives of this government, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Prebble: — The only province in Canada to reduce child poverty during the decade while in every other province it either increased or remained the same, and while it increased by 118 per cent in Tory Ontario.

And finally, Mr. Speaker, that this Assembly acknowledge the challenge that lies ahead, the work that needs to be done to further reduce poverty in this province. And I've talked about some of the initiatives that I believe are needed in terms of a neighbourhood-based . . . more neighbourhood-based employment opportunities for low-income people; further reforms to the Saskatchewan Assistance Plan, including an increase in the Saskatchewan Child Benefit, including a clothing and transportation allowance for people who are actively looking for work, including, Mr. Deputy Speaker, a disability pension for people who have significant disabilities in this province which prevent them from being able to work on a full-time basis, and including, Mr. Deputy Speaker, an increase in the rates that are paid under the Saskatchewan Child Benefit, and for the food, clothing, and personal allowance for those on social assistance, and the reinstatement of the transportation allowance for those on social assistance. And those views, Mr. Speaker, I want to emphasize are my own views. But I think they should be important priorities for our government.

And also, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I think that we need to take seriously the issue of youth on our streets, particularly in urban Saskatchewan; and we need a major initiative to provide educational opportunities, employment opportunities, and counselling and support opportunities for those young people, Mr. Deputy Speaker. And this should not only be a priority for our line government departments, it should also be a priority for our Crown corporations, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and for the private sector.

And I just want to give one example of the kind of thing that the Crowns could be doing. I note for instance with interest in the city of Saskatoon that SGI is paying out \$5 million a year, Mr. Deputy Speaker, in premiums on car theft and break and enter.

Well, Mr. Deputy Speaker, why not take some of that money and put it into employment and training opportunities for the young people that are committing the break and enter and the car theft. Let's get them off the street, out of criminal activity, and back into school. Those are the kind of initiatives that we need to take.

So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the challenge of tackling poverty in this province lies ahead of us. But in looking at that challenge let's not forget the progress we've made. The progress we've made is significant, but the further reforms that are required, the further program initiatives that are required are also significant, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I know our government's up for the task, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I know we're going to see further progress in the years ahead.

In fact, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I am confident that when the Canadian Council on Social Development publishes its next report on reductions in child poverty, our rates will have gone down further because of some of the recent initiatives that we've taken that I've talked about that have happened since 1997.

But let's not be complacent, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Just because we're making progress, let's not be complacent. Let's implement the other initiatives that I've talked about. Let's take our province to the point where we have the lowest poverty rate in all of Canada. Let's ultimately set our objective to eliminate poverty in this province, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

I'm proud of what our government's done and I know we're up for the task ahead. Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Prebble: — . . . which it's my pleasure to do, seconded by the member for Saskatoon Southeast:

That this Assembly recognize the continuing decrease in social assistance caseloads in Saskatchewan, and the reduction in child poverty in Saskatchewan in the past decade and advocate that high priority be given to further steps to reduce poverty in our province.

Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

(1630)

Ms. Lorje: — Thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

I want to start off first by apologizing to the House for being so eager earlier on before the member from Saskatoon Greystone so eloquently talked about the initiatives that we have done to decrease social assistance caseloads. I apologize to the House that I stood up and moved the motion. I clearly want to second it though. I'm very pleased to be able to enter into this debate.

Earlier today we had a debate about agriculture. And there seemed to be a suggestion that unless you're a farmer, you can't properly enter into the debate about agriculture, and because most of us on the government side represent city constituencies that we don't really know what we're talking about when we're talking about agriculture.

Now following that logic through, I guess one could assume then that you have to have been on social assistance in order to be able to adequately and eloquently address the issues of poverty in our society.

Well, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I stand here in this House today as somebody who was on social assistance for the first 17 years of my life. I stand here today, I think, as an example of how you can succeed despite great odds.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Ms. Lorje: — When I was five years old, Mr. Deputy Speaker, my father was killed in a car accident as he was being driven home from Claresholm, Alberta to where the family was stationed at the RCAF (Royal Canadian Air Force) station in Calgary. He was thrown from the vehicle and killed outright. My mother, at that point, had four young children under the age of five. I was the eldest. And there were very few options at that point. Probably if we'd had seat belt legislation in place in 1952

my father would be alive. We didn't have seat belt legislation, my father died, and my mother was faced with the not envious task of raising several young children on her own.

She had trained as a school teacher but with four young children it was impossible for her to go back to school. So she moved back to her hometown of Caron, Saskatchewan and raised her children as best she could, but she had to depend on public assistance.

Public assistance in those days, I will tell you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, was not a wonderful thing. And I could probably regale the House with many tales about the mean-spiritedness that I had to experience because I was a dirty, welfare-bum kid. I won't do that because as many people who were negative towards our family because we had to be on welfare, there were an equal number of people who were very positive and were very helpful.

And I remember very fondly being offered skim milk from our neighbours; having people come and say well, we've killed a deer, you can have part of it; being offered chickens to slaughter in the fall and so forth.

Many of the people were extremely helpful and helped a young widow and her family survive the adversity of poverty. Now I think the fact that I stand here today is a tribute both to my mother, who was a wonderful woman, and to the education system in this province. And if I had not been able to get a student loan and to go on to university, I would not be here.

I tell this story, Mr. Deputy Speaker, because I think it's important for us to recognize that people going on to social assistance, it can happen so easily. And escaping poverty is not so easy but there are some solutions that we can put in place. We have done some things like increasing access to post-secondary education, like ensuring that people feel proud and stay in schools and so forth.

We haven't resolved all the ills though that contribute towards poverty, Mr. Deputy Speaker. We have though, I think, moved a fair distance. In the last five years, for instance, there has been a 15 per cent decrease in welfare dependency in this province — a 15 per cent decrease.

Mr. Speaker, we have moved from a caseload . . . We now have a caseload of 34,019 cases, representing 62,988 persons in this province. Now I would suggest that is still 62,988 people too many who are living in poverty. But the fact is we have moved some considerable distance and we have a 15 per cent decrease in the welfare-dependency rate.

But, Mr. Deputy Speaker, if you listen to the members opposite, you would think that that simply wasn't so. You would think that 100,000, 150,000, 200,000 people were on welfare in this province.

I think it's a shame that the opposition has this tactic of going around and trying to convince people that everybody's on welfare. But I just want to talk a little bit about some of the things that have been said in this legislature in the last little while.

On March 19, 1999 during the 19th session the MLA for Kindersley, representing I guess the Alberta envy party said, quote:

Let's talk about welfare in Saskatchewan. Let's talk about our welfare numbers in this province. From 1991 to 1997 the welfare rolls in Saskatchewan swelled from 53,400 to 79,700, an increase of nearly 50 per cent . . . The national average was actually an increase of 22 per cent.

During the same period of time in other provinces (he goes on to say) they've decreased their numbers . . . have decreased the number of people on social services.

Well he doesn't go on to point out that the number of people on social services in Saskatchewan has also decreased. As a matter of fact along with Manitoba and Alberta, Saskatchewan has the lowest dependency rate of any province in the whole Dominion of Canada. We have made significant progress in terms of decreasing the welfare caseloads.

Again the member from Rosthern on December 8, 1999 said in *Hansard*:

I could have spent a lot of time on the welfare numbers — the worst in Canada from an NDP government that claims to have a social conscience.

The same day the Leader of the Opposition, the member for Rosetown-Biggar, talked about Saskatchewan having the highest taxes in the country, the worst health care in the country, the worst highways, the longest welfare rolls, the worst job creation record. It seems . . . I could go on and on.

April 17, 1999, the member from Humboldt made similar allegations about welfare rates in this province. March 26, 1999, the member from Melfort was on his feet saying that the reality today, when the NDP was elected in 1991, more hungry children, more people unemployed, more people on welfare. Flies in the face of reality, but they keep saying it. Again on March 23, 1999, the member from Kelvington-Wadena made similar statements.

This, in spite of the fact, this in spite of the fact that the welfare rates are going down. Our dependency rate is amongst the lowest in the whole Dominion of Canada.

Now you would have thought that after the fall session, they would have gone away and done their homework and stopped this myth making about the number of people who are on welfare in this province.

But, oh no, again they're at it. May 2, 2000, the member for Saskatchewan Rivers says:

In the meantime, (he says) . . . while the revamping is going to (and then it's something inaudible; he carries on) . . . we're waiting for it to start, 5,000 jobs have been lost in this province, Mr. Speaker, because of the inane policies of this government whose desire it is, is to control people and to put them out of work and say that we are doing good. Putting people on welfare and on unemployment insurance rolls is certainly not an attitude to take and say that this is

good for the province.

Well, Mr. Speaker, that is not true. The welfare dependency is going down. It's down by 15 per cent. The number of children and families receiving social assistance has decreased by 11,000. That is a decrease of 31 per cent.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Ms. Lorje: — Now, Mr. Speaker, as I understand the right-wing mentality, the mentality, and I have to admit I have an imperfect understanding of it, but it seems to me what they say is, get people off welfare; the best social assistance is a job. Well guess what? We're delivering on that.

Right now, in March of this year, we had 478,000 people working in this province, the most ever in Saskatchewan. The number of full-time jobs is increasing; unemployment is decreasing. Our unemployment rate in March was 5.2 per cent compared to nationally a 7.3 per cent unemployment rate.

So we are working to get the economy going and to get those jobs for people so that they can have an alternative to assistance.

While we're talking though about social assistance, we need to look at who is actually on welfare in Saskatchewan. I mentioned earlier there were 34,000 cases in Saskatchewan of people who are on social assistance. Fifty-five thousand of those people, a full 19,000 people, are not fully employable. They could not get a job. Because of various disabilities, 19,000 people cannot work in this province.

Those are people that we have a responsibility and a duty to as a caring society. We have to provide some measure of dignity and sustenance to those people. Those 19,000 people require an adequate living. And I don't think there's anyone in this House that would deny those 19,000 people an opportunity to be able to put food on their tables, to be able to clothe their children.

Just as my mother did back in the '50s when she had to rely on social assistance — my mother was unable to be employed. And I don't think people here today would deny her the right to receive social assistance and to be able to raise her children with dignity. And I don't think we should deny those 55 per cent of our people who are on social assistance, the right to dignity and to assistance.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Ms. Lorje: — Now if we buy the right-wing argument that the best social assistance is a job, what we have to do is look at what is the best route to get a job. And I would suggest to members of this House that the best route is education. The best way off welfare is to get an education.

Eighty per cent of Saskatchewan people have grade 12 or more, but in contrast, 70 per cent of the employable people who were on social assistance have less than a grade 12.

When we look at the youth who were on social assistance, the statistics I think are even more stark. Twenty-five per cent of the social assistance caseload today is youth, 18 to 25. And only

20 per cent of those 8,500 cases actually have any education beyond a grade 12.

(1645)

And we all know that today's economy requires not just a grade 12, but extensive post-secondary education. The low-skill or no-skill jobs are almost a thing of the past. And so it is imperative, if people are going to get off social assistance, that they remain in school and that they have the opportunity to go on and do post-secondary education.

This is particularly so, I would suggest, when we talk about Aboriginal people. Overall, Aboriginal people unfortunately comprise about 40 per cent of the total caseload on social assistance, and 50 per cent of the youth on social assistance are Aboriginal. So we need to have a very specific focus on Aboriginal needs and concerns when we're talking about decreasing poverty even further.

In that regard, I am very proud and very pleased of the specific Aboriginal educational institutions that we have in the province. Institutions like Gabriel Dumont, Saskatchewan Indian Federated College, the SUNTEP (Saskatchewan urban native teacher education program) and the NORTEP (northern teacher education program) programs. These are highly successful and the graduates of these programs get jobs after their training, and they stay here in Saskatchewan, and they are fully contributing members of society.

In this House we have just finished passing legislation for the Saskatchewan Indian Institute of Technologies. And I'm very proud of that. That was a banner day in this House, Mr. Speaker, when we saw representatives from SIIT sit in the Speaker's gallery and watch the Minister of Post-Secondary Education do second reading of the speech for SIIT.

This is a major initiative that will make a difference.

Now one of the things that we have done, Mr. Speaker, in the nine years that we've formed government, one of the things that we can very much brag about is the fact that mining employment in the North has doubled. Mining employment for Aboriginal people has doubled in this province. And we know that one worker probably supports about three or four people.

So we have several thousand people living in the North, and it's not a great stretch to understand that most of those people are Aboriginal people. We have now several thousand people who are living in the North, working in mining . . . (inaudible interjection) . . . working in uranium mines, yes, working in the mining industry in this province, taking their place as fully employed workers and making sure that we have fewer people on welfare.

And this has come about because of strong partnerships between government, business, and community. We've seen, for instance, the business contracts in the North are up. In 1991, those contracts that resided very specifically in the North were about \$20 million. In 1999, those contracts were up to \$180 million.

We're talking about opportunities for Aboriginal people in

trucking and transport; we're talking about opportunities for Aboriginal people in construction, in site construction in the mines up North, in road construction; we're talking about opportunities for Aboriginal people in catering. We're talking about opportunities for Aboriginal people in mining expansion. We've made major improvements.

Well unfortunately we have yet to make those same kinds of improvements in terms of Aboriginal employment in the potash mines down south or in the oil and gas industry. But it is my hope that as we work with businesses in partnership, that we will see the same initiatives and opportunities for employment for Aboriginal people in potash mining as well as in the oil and gas sector.

Mr. Speaker, the problem of poverty is a multi-faceted one. It's a difficult one, and there are no quick-fix solutions. There's no unilateral one-dimensional approach. We have to, all of us, opposition and government, work together to stamp out the blight called poverty.

I think though if I could close on any kind of a note, I would like to say that the best way that we can tackle poverty is if all of us take just a moment out of our busy schedules and imagine, even for 30 seconds, what it would be like if we ourselves were on welfare. If we had no money, if we were feeling desperate and hopeless and powerless.

If we think about that, we think about what it would be like to be on welfare, if we actually take a moment to walk a mile in someone else's shoes or in someone else's moccasins. We have to ask ourselves: what would we need; what would we want; what would be helpful to us in order to get off welfare, to get an education, and to get a job.

And I would suggest there are three things, Mr. Speaker, that we would need. The first is an opportunity to maintain our dignity. Without dignity, human beings have no self-esteem, and without self-esteem, it is extremely difficult to force yourself out of your home and to go out and put out those resumes and to try to get a job. So we need to create the conditions, the psychological conditions, so that people can have dignity whether or not they're on social assistance.

That is something that we, all of us and particularly we as public representatives, can help to foster. We're not going to do any good by dumping on poor people and saying, oh they're poor because they're lazy, shiftless, no-good bums. We've got to encourage people and allow them those remaining shreds of human dignity so that they can have self-respect.

Which brings me to the second thing that people on welfare need that I think, if we imagine for a moment, if we put ourselves in their shoes, we'll understand. People who are on social assistance require respect. They are not there because they choose to live on the dole. That is a pernicious and an ugly myth that does a disservice to people like my mother who raised her children with dignity and in spite of great odds, but raised them on social assistance.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Ms. Lorje: — It was hard for my mother to accept social

assistance and she needed to hold her head high despite that. She was able to do it because she received respect — from her friends, from her community, from her family. Dignity and respect.

And this third thing, Mr. Speaker, I think all of us would understand if we took a moment and got away from our political rhetoric and thought about what it is that we would require, that we need, that would be helpful for us if we had no money and we were forced to be on social assistance, the third thing, I think we could all agree on, is that there has to be an absolute, ironclad, total focus on children.

We need to focus on the needs and concerns of those children on social assistance. And I think by doing that, by having a forward-looking, future orientation and encouraging them to stay in school and to get their post-secondary education, we will be able to start to make an even greater dent in the numbers of people on social assistance in this province.

Mr. Speaker, I've gone on at some length and I would just like to close now by thanking members of this Assembly for their indulgence in letting me relate a few of my childhood experiences. And I ask you all to always remember it is imperative that we have empathy and respect for people and that we be prepared to walk a mile in their shoes.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Kowalsky: — Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I would like to take a moment just to thank the members from Saskatoon Greystone and Saskatoon Southeast for their very thoughtful and well-considered words on the topic of debate. They were very informative and spoken with passion and conviction, and I do want to thank them on behalf of members of the Assembly.

And, Mr. Speaker, I move that debate be adjourned on this motion.

Debate adjourned.

The Assembly adjourned at 4:57 p.m.

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