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6TH SESSION, 37TH PARLIAMENT

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THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 17, 2005

The House met at 2:04 p.m.

Introductions by Members

Hon. C. Hansen: When I wore the hat of Minister of Health Services in this House, I had the pleasure of working with a very talented young lady by the name of Alex Dutton, who was my executive assistant at the time. There are actually two of her friends here to join us in the gallery today, both of whom are benefiting from some great new opportunities in our post-secondary education system. Diana Kuhr is finishing nursing at UBC and hopes to specialize in pediatrics. Anne Marie Colwill is interviewing.... She hopes to get into the UBC medical school and, hopefully, will be able to benefit from the almost doubling of the number of seats we have at the UBC medical school. Would the House please make them welcome.

Also, it gives me great pleasure to welcome, on behalf of the Premier today, a grade 5 class from West Point Grey Academy in the riding of Vancouver-Point Grey. They're accompanied by their teachers Ms. Jennifer Gunasekera and Mr. Harley Rollins. Will the House please make them very welcome as well.

[1405]

J. MacPhail: Today visiting us in the gallery is a young woman named Natalia Heilke. Natalia is from Kansas, but she's currently living here while she, too, is doing her studies at UVic. She is on a reading break this week, and she decided to come and see for herself what goes on here. She is fortunate enough to be the niece of one of our researchers, Paula Gunn. She's here because she actually doesn't quite believe the stories that Paula Gunn brings home from the Legislature, so she's here to see whether they're actually true. Would the House please make her welcome.

Hon. G. Plant: Visiting in the gallery today is Tim d'Estrube, who is visiting from England, where he works for the National Health Service. Apparently, if pressed, he will admit to a relationship with a member at the Table. Notwithstanding that, I hope the House will please make him very welcome.

R. Hawes: I have two introductions today. The first is with the group from West Point Grey Academy, and that is Logan Graham, who is ten years old. A number of us met Logan this morning at the arthritis awareness breakfast. Logan is very active in the Children's Arthritis Foundation and is here today hoping to see a big fight at question period. We've assured him that that doesn't happen here and that you, Mr. Speaker, will ensure we are on our best behaviour. Could I ask the House to please make Logan welcome.

Second, Mary McNeil, the president and CEO of the B.C. Cancer Foundation — who are the big fundraisers for the Cancer Agency that operates the genome centre — is here and has been talking to members of

government to try to ensure that the funding to keep the genome centre going is going to be at hand. I would like the House to please make Mary welcome and to recognize the great work she does on behalf of all of us.

Hon. L. Reid: In the precincts today — actually, he just drifted by that door over there — is my son. Will Nicholas Ivan Donnelly Reid-Friesen is here. He's turning one, and actually, Mr. Speaker, at this very moment he's visiting in your office. I trust it's all going well. I'd ask the House to please make him welcome.

J. Kwan: Don't worry, Mr. Speaker. My daughter, who's almost two, is actually at home in Vancouver at a day care centre, so she won't be terrorizing your office. You need not worry.

Today I'd like to introduce the Keep Five Alive Coalition. They are a coalition that is fighting to save the public education system in British Columbia. Particularly, they're working hard to try and restore the five-day school week in school district 64. The Keep Five Alive Coalition consists of parents, educators, students, workers and generally concerned citizens on the Gulf Islands. I had the great pleasure to meet with them today to hear about their concerns, and I would ask the House to please welcome these dedicated individuals.

G. Halsey-Brandt: Today we have three special guests in the visitors' gallery. They are John and Mary Horton of Richmond and Runa Fiander of Victoria. I have known John Horton for many, many years. John was active originally in the Coast Guard Auxiliary and the Royal Lifeboat Society in Steveston.

As the members know, the mouth of the Fraser River at Steveston is a very dangerous waterway, and he's been active in patrolling and rescuing both commercial fishermen and pleasure boaters as well. He is also a world-renowned marine artist who has served with our army and naval forces overseas in his role as an artist. Would the members please make them all welcome.

G. Hogg: We have with us in the galleries today Aman Dodd and Kelsey Dukelow, who are both government staff members. Kelsey will be leaving us tomorrow, as she's moving on to work with a local investment firm. Kelsey is one of the proud recipients of one of the awards of excellence which have been granted in the east block of this wonderful establishment. I hope the House would wish her all the very best in her new endeavours.

[1410]

Statements (Standing Order 25B)

INVESTMENT DEALERS ASSOCIATION COMMENTS ON 2005-06 BUDGET

R. Hawes: On budget day and yesterday, many of us had an opportunity to meet with the Investment

Dealers Association to hear not just their comments on the budget but also their advice for attracting further investment to continue with the rebuilding of our province. These are the people who underwrite investment, manage significant portfolios and assist investment to find a safe home. They pay acute attention to the financial and regulatory operations of governments from coast to coast and at the federal level. They know investment always flees where it is not welcome. With it go jobs, prosperity and ultimately the government's ability to fund social programs, health care and education. That's the lesson of the dismal decade of the nineties.

What does the Investment Dealers Association say about Budget 2005? First, they say it is the most transparent of any they have ever seen in any province and at the federal level in this country — ever, bar none. They say that the move to generally accepted accounting principles produces total confidence in the numbers. They say the debt reduction planned this year and the strategic borrowing in subsequent years to fund infrastructure improvements will enhance economic development and increase our attractiveness to investors.

They say our substantial decrease in the debt-to-GDP ratio, resulting from prudent debt management, combined with economic growth should result in a further credit rating improvement from the bonding agencies. That's good news.

They say that while reaction to the tax cuts tabled in 2001 was not immediate, the current surge in investment and the tremendous turnaround in our economy were largely due to government initiatives such as this. They applaud our deregulation success, as they know the needless red tape and administrative roadblocks put in place by the NDP made every other province, including Newfoundland, more attractive as an investment destination.

To the Investment Dealers Association: thank you for your advice, your support and for helping us make our province the best place in the world to work, play and invest.

Lastly, to Jim Sinclair: we're not going back to 2001.

TRADE WITH ASIA

D. Hayer: British Columbia's continued economic prosperity is tied directly to building bridges to the world. If this province is to prosper over the decades, we must build on our trading relations with Europe and create new relationships with Southeast Asia, reaching far beyond our borders and our current reliance on the United States as the market for our products.

This government is taking aggressive steps to develop markets in the rapidly expanding economies of Asia. We are now seeing growing interest in China for our wood products. Our mining sector is seeing renewed activity, particularly in coal production for our Chinese market.

We have to look beyond our base resources and develop a huge flow of goods not just to China but to

India, Korea, Indonesia, Philippines and all other Asia-Pacific Rim countries. As vice-chair of the Asian Economic Development Committee created by the Premier, I will be focusing a great deal of time and effort to assist in establishing these long-term trade relationships, working toward building bridges that will see products flowing both ways. We will see people from many diverse communities coming here to work, to learn and to help us grow.

It is fitting that I rise today during Multiculturalism Week to talk about building links with the world. Our strength in global trading networks will come from the knowledge, the expertise and the ties to home of our large and diverse ethnic communities. Our immigrant communities will be the key players in our Asia-Pacific initiative. I know they and their families will be among the key beneficiaries as we embark on a golden decade of endless opportunities.

[1415]

SPIRIT OF B.C. WEEK

G. Halsey-Brandt: It will be five years from last Saturday when Canada, British Columbia and Vancouver-Whistler will welcome the world to the 2010 Winter Olympics and Paralympic Games. The opening ceremony, to be held in B.C. Place, will be watched by hundreds of millions of viewers around the world on February 12, 2010.

To kick off the five-year countdown, this week was proclaimed Spirit of B.C. Week in our province. Last weekend in over 78 cities, towns and villages around British Columbia, residents participated in a wide variety of events to mark that date. Spirit of British Columbia committees organized a cornucopia of community events. In my community of Richmond, over 500 residents led by a host of children turned out for an ice-skating afternoon at Minoru Arena. As Richmond is a venue for the long-track speed-skating competition and a new oval, the choice of activity was appropriate.

Events held around the province ranged from Spirit of B.C. flag-raising ceremonies to curling bonspiels, charity hockey games, first nations entertainment, fireworks, snowshoeing and snowmobile races — and in several communities, walk, run and jog, going-to-Whistler fitness challenges.

It seems only yesterday when we were all on the edge of our seats waiting to hear if Vancouver would be awarded the 2010 games. Now it's less than five years away. Spirit of B.C. communities around our province working with Marion Lay and 2010 LegaciesNow are going to highlight arts and culture opportunities, literacy initiatives, volunteer recruitment and training, sports and recreation, and economic opportunities over the next five years as we build to 2010.

Thank you to all the community volunteers and even the MLAs who participated over the last weekend. The momentum has begun.

Mr. Speaker: That concludes members' statements.

Oral Questions

LONG-TERM CARE BEDS

J. MacPhail: Although the government refuses to have a line-by-line debate on the budget, the B.C. Liberals can't completely hide from this House. So let me ask the Minister of Finance a question about the budget. According to the government's own documents, it spent \$100 million to create 140 additional beds in long-term care over the last four years. That works out to a total of \$700,000 per new bed. That seems very expensive.

To the Minister of Finance: can he explain why the government says it spent \$100 million on new beds but only managed to build an additional 140 of them?

Hon. C. Hansen: There have been a tremendous number of new beds and renovated beds that meet the needs of seniors in a much more modern and contemporary way, compared to the stock of beds we were faced with in 2001. There is a recognition.... We hear from seniors all over the province that they want options other than just going into what we used to refer to as the nursing home with its total loss of independence. The new models of assisted living provide medical supports, they provide independence, and they provide for real quality of life for our seniors. That's what they've been asking for.

There have been over 4,000 new beds opened in British Columbia. It is towards our net increase of 5,000 beds. We obviously still have a ways to go to achieve that goal, but we will get there by 2008.

Mr. Speaker: Leader of the Opposition has a supplementary question.

J. MacPhail: Here's the story the government is trying to spin. It's that, oops, they didn't know how bad the conditions were when they got into government, and therefore they couldn't add those 5,000 new beds.

Well, here is what happened when the B.C. Liberal long-term care bed plan was released. When was that released? A full year after they took power. That was released in 2002, and the then Minister of State for Long Term Care said that the decommissioned beds would be replaced and that another 5,000 beds would be added — a full year after this government took office. She was very clear. Replacing the beds was part of an ongoing process that was going to happen anyway.

Can the Minister of Finance explain what's going on here? How come he's now saying that they had to decommission and replace those beds? How come the taxpayers got stuck with a \$100 million bill to build only 140 additional beds? Or was that money just used to maintain the existing level of beds, despite the promise his government made in 2002?

[1420]

Hon. C. Hansen: Let's be very clear what the commitment was that we made. That was for a net increase

in the number of beds that are available in the province for intermediate and long-term care from what was there as a base number when we formed government in 2001. We were going to add a net increase of 5,000 beds. So when we talk about beds that have been phased out and we talk about the beds that have been renovated, that doesn't increase the net amount. The commitment stands that there will be a net increase of 5,000 beds. We had hoped to get there by 2006. It's going to take us until 2008, but we are making sure that the needs of seniors in the province are being met.

Mr. Speaker: The Leader of the Opposition has a further supplementary.

J. MacPhail: Every time a question gets asked about their broken promise to seniors about adding 5,000 new beds, we get a new answer. There was a new answer right there. Okay. Here's why we need....

Interjections.

Mr. Speaker: Please, hon. members. The Leader of the Opposition has the floor.

J. MacPhail: Here's why we actually need a full debate in the House. Here's a quote: "There will be 5,000 beds in addition to what we would have had otherwise, because the decommissioning process would have taken place on an ongoing basis anyway." That was in 2002 when the government was under the gun for not telling the accurate facts about what their promise was. There they restated it in 2002. That was the answer then.

To the Minister of Finance: why hasn't that happened? What went wrong since March of 2002?

Hon. C. Hansen: The commitment that we made is the same today as it was in 2001, except we know it's going to take two years longer than we had originally planned. I think the question that needs to be asked, the question that we need to ask — and maybe we can have this debate out on the hustings — is: what did they do? What did that government do when they were in office? What did that member for Vancouver-Hastings do when she was the Minister of Health?

We saw during the whole decade of the 1990s a government that was locked in an old style of care for seniors, putting them in nursing homes when in fact they wanted their independence. We are actually developing, and we have been doing this.... There have been thousands of new beds opened in the province, which actually provide for that independence. Let me tell....

Interjections.

Mr. Speaker: Order, please. The Minister of Finance has the floor.

Hon. C. Hansen: I had the pleasure of meeting an elderly lady in Williams Lake just last fall. She was

actually a lady that led the protest in Williams Lake about the closure of the old Cariboo Lodge facility, because they wanted it maintained. They wanted it to stay open. She moved into the new assisted-living facility. Do you know what her words to me were? She said: "If I'd only known how nice it was going to be." That is a testimony from a senior.

J. Kwan: Seniors are now saying that if they only knew in 2001 what this government would do.... They promised to replace the old beds and add an additional 5,000 new intermediate and long-term care beds. This an important question, because this budget only allocates \$200 million for new beds over three years, and it does not.... That's not just for seniors beds; it is also for mental health beds and for addiction services as well.

Can the Minister of Finance tell us the allocation of the \$200 million? How many additional residential care beds will be built? How many palliative care beds will be built? How many mental health care units will be built? And how many detox treatment beds will be built?

Hon. C. Hansen: One of the things that needs to be underscored is that from the time we formed government to the budget that's been brought down this week, we will see a net increase in health spending in this province of \$3.8 billion. We're making sure that the needs of seniors....

Interjections.

Mr. Speaker: Order, please, hon. members. Let us hear the answer.

Hon. C. Hansen: We're making sure that the needs of seniors are getting met — whether it's Pharmacare, whether it's their home support or whether it's their needs for hospitalization.

To answer the member's specific question yet again, we are increasing — a net increase from 2001 — the number of intermediate and long-term care beds in the province by a net increase of 5,000 beds by the end of 2008. That's the commitment we made, and that's the net increase in the number of beds. The commitment stands.

Interjections.

Mr. Speaker: Order, please. The member for Vancouver–Mount Pleasant has a supplementary question.

[1425]

J. Kwan: It is fine to make promises over and over and over again, but British Columbians have learned the hard way. Promises don't mean anything if they are not real.

This government's track record suggests that they will use that money to replace old beds with no plan or budget for the new ones. We see in the budget \$200

million not just for long-term care beds but for a whole slew of others. How can the minister promise that there would be 5,000 new long-term and intermediate care beds by 2008 when his budget only allocates \$200 million for those beds? How could he make that commitment, and how can he show British Columbians that he would actually keep that commitment?

Hon. C. Hansen: This is, I think, a classic example of how the NDP are locked in an old style of thinking. Our seniors today want to maximize their independence. We want to make sure they are in environments where they can have their own space, their own apartment-like environments.

Interjections.

Mr. Speaker: Order, please.

Interjections.

Mr. Speaker: Order, please. You asked the question; let's hear the answer.

Hon. C. Hansen: The other thing I think the NDP make a big mistake about is that when they think of care for our seniors, they want to stick them into health facilities. We want them to be able to move into homelike environments. One of the mistakes they make is that they look only at the budget of the Ministry of Health Services. They should also be looking at the budget of Community, Aboriginal and Women's Services where they will find, for example, \$153 million a year dedicated to seniors housing in British Columbia as well. Across ministries we're making sure those needs get met.

ACUTE CARE SERVICES AT SURREY MEMORIAL HOSPITAL

J. Brar: The broken promise on new beds has resulted in a growing backlog in hospitals as long-term care patients take up acute care beds.

Interjection.

J. Brar: Listen to the question and then laugh.

Last Friday Baljit Bains was taken to Surrey Memorial Hospital by ambulance. He was sick, coughing blood and displaying other serious symptoms. After four hours he was sent home, where he had a massive heart attack. There was no bed for him at Surrey Memorial Hospital — no bed. After two days in the emergency room rather than in the intensive care unit, where he should have been, Mr. Bains died.

My question is: can the Minister of Health explain why the people of my community cannot count on good care when they're sick?

Hon. C. Hansen: First of all, I extend my condolences to the family. It's obviously a very stressful time. We have first-class doctors and nurses and other medi-

cal professions that work at our hospitals in this province. I know they do their utmost to make sure that every citizen who comes into an emergency room is properly diagnosed and properly treated.

I would, in addition, point out to the member that the number of blocked beds we have in our hospital — what they refer to as alternate level care beds.... These are patients in acute care facilities who should be in some other level of care. Those numbers....

Interjections.

Mr. Speaker: Let's hear the answer, please.

Hon. C. Hansen: Those numbers, in terms of absolute percentage and in terms of absolute numbers, have come down each and every year that we've been in office.

When the NDP were in office, it would take over a year to get access to a long-term care facility. Today that wait time is about 60 to 90 days.

[1430]

Mr. Speaker: The member for Surrey-Panorama Ridge has a supplementary.

J. Brar: That's not the answer....

Interjections.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. members, the member for Surrey-Panorama Ridge has the floor.

J. Brar: That's not the answer the Bains family wants from you, Minister of Finance.

Interjection.

J. Brar: Who is exploiting?

An Hon. Member: You are.

J. Brar: Listen to the question again. I have spoken to the members of the Bains family. I have spoken at length to Mr. Bains's family members. They are very, very upset with the level of care Mr. Bains received before his death.

My question to the Minister of Health is: how can we trust that the Minister of Health is taking actions to improve care for patients like Mr. Bains when the government refuses to put its health care budget up for scrutiny in this House?

Hon. C. Hansen: The budget for the Ministry of Health Services was set out in the budget documents on Tuesday. It is there for everyone to see. They can go on the website and see. What they will see from the budget is that in each and every year...

Interjection.

Mr. Speaker: Order, please.

Hon. C. Hansen: ...since we formed government we have increased the budget considerably. There is more money going to the health authorities, and they are actually doing a pretty good job of trying to make sure that the health care system improves.

We're clearly not there. There is clearly room for improvement in the health care system, but I can say unequivocally that it is a heck of a lot better today than it was four years ago.

LEASE OF B.C. RAIL TO CN RAIL

P. Nettleton: Hunter Harrison, CEO of Canadian National Railways, is quoted as saying that his company has experienced a 68 percent increase in its fourth-quarter profits for the year 2004. To what does Mr. Harrison attribute this unprecedented profit surge at CN? CN executives say that the prime factor for this remarkable increase in profit is their recent acquisition of B.C. Rail.

Mr. Harrison knows a good deal when he sees it. This is the same B.C. Rail that the Premier said was a loser and would continue to be a loser and that B.C. should get rid of it.

Interjection.

P. Nettleton: I see that the Minister of Transportation thinks this is amusing. In any event, perhaps he will answer my question. Will the minister...?

Interjections.

Mr. Speaker: Order, please. Order, please. Will the hon. member please put his question.

P. Nettleton: Will the minister now admit that he made a mistake in judgment by virtually giving away a profitable railroad, or does he really believe that everything Hunter Harrison touches turns to gold overnight?

Hon. K. Falcon: Actually, I'm very pleased to answer that question. What I will remind the member of is that under government ownership over the last ten years taxpayers had to write down over \$1 billion in losses on B.C. Rail. I would remind the member of that.

Interjection.

Mr. Speaker: Order, please.

Hon. K. Falcon: Actually, it is interesting. I hear the Leader of the Opposition heckling from the other side. That's the same opposition which, while in government, was forcing B.C. Rail to pay dividends to the government when they were losing money. I mean, that's the kind of silly behaviour that took place in the province.

I will say to the member that under the lease arrangement it is not just the province saying that a billion dollars is good value. It includes J.P. Morgan, it includes Deutsche Bank, it includes Prudential Financial, and it includes many other firms like Merrill Lynch, which all said that the government got exceptional value for the partnership relationship.

[End of question period.]

Petitions

J. Kwan: I rise to table a petition. The Gulf Islands parents and their supporters, members of the Keep Five Alive Coalition, rented a school bus. They've come to Victoria to deliver an over 1,000-signature petition to the B.C. Legislature. They're calling for the restoration of the five-day school week in school district No. 64, and they're protesting cuts to education in B.C. that have not been rectified by the recent much-publicized pre-election spending.

[1435]

Tabling Documents

Hon. G. Plant: I have the great pleasure and the honour to table the final report of the British Columbia Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform entitled *Making Every Vote Count: The Case for Electoral Reform in British Columbia*.

Reports from Committees

J. Bray: I have the honour to present the report of the Special Committee on the Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform for the fifth session of the thirty-seventh parliament.

I move that the report be taken as read and received.

Motion approved.

J. Bray: Mr. Speaker, I ask leave of the House to permit the moving of a motion to adopt the report.

Leave granted.

J. Bray: I move the report be adopted, and in moving the adoption of the report I would like to make a few comments.

One year ago 160 British Columbians embarked on the most ambitious exercise in deliberative democracy in the history of the Commonwealth. The Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform was created to allow ordinary British Columbians to review electoral systems, and if it decided on a different method of electing MLAs, it would put that system directly to voters in the May general election.

From January to March of 2004 members of the citizens' assembly learned about the diversity of elec-

toral systems used throughout the world. In May and June of 2004 the assembly conducted its public consultation phase. Fifty public hearings were held across the entire province. In addition, the citizens' assembly received more than 1,600 written submissions on various aspects of electoral reform. From September to November the citizens' assembly reconvened to review what they'd heard during the public hearings.

On December 10, 2004, the Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform released its final report entitled *Making Every Vote Count: The Case for Electoral Reform in British Columbia*. In the report the citizens' assembly recommended that the province adopt a single transferable voting system customized for British Columbia called the BC-STV.

The special committee was struck to act as a link between the fully independent citizens' assembly and this Legislature. We received regular public briefings from the chair and staff of the citizens' assembly. In addition, the special committee confirmed the chair of the citizens' assembly, Dr. Jack Blaney, as well as senior staff.

On behalf of the special committee I would like to thank Dr. Blaney for his tireless dedication and commitment to the process of deliberative democracy. I'd also like to acknowledge the work of senior staff of the citizens' assembly: Dr. Ken Carty, Dr. Campbell Sherman, Dr. Leo Perra, Marilyn Jacobson, Don MacLachlan, Susanna Haas and Christina Wong. I'd also like to thank Craig James, the Clerk of Committees, and his staff for their assistance.

Finally, we would like to thank the 160 British Columbians who volunteered their time and commitment to advance electoral reform in British Columbia. Collectively they exemplified respect, dignity, intelligence and a common desire to make British Columbia a better place to live.

Motion approved.

Orders of the Day

Hon. G. Bruce: I call committee stage on Bill 4.

Committee of the Whole House

ATTORNEY GENERAL STATUTES AMENDMENT ACT, 2005 (continued)

The House in committee on Bill 4; J. Weisbeck in the chair.

The committee met at 2:40 p.m.

On section 5 (continued).

J. Kwan: I'll close with these remarks around this section of the bill.

The Attorney General tries to insinuate that the opposition is not in support of legal aid getting the \$2 million or so surplus. That is simply not true. The reality is this: the opposition has criticized and continues to criticize the government on its legal aid cuts — some \$36 million worth of cuts in the area of legal aid. We have called on the government to reinstate those dollars to ensure that the people who actually need legal services get the services they need.

It is this government that actually made those cuts and, in my view, inflicted tremendous damage in the broader community and particularly for women who need services. We know that with services such as these that when the government makes these cuts, they tend to go against the women who need the services. The government made these cuts, and for the first time in the history of British Columbia, the Attorney General was censored by his own profession as a result of these legal aid cuts.

I want to be very clear that we do support this section of the bill, which calls for the surplus to be put back into the legal aid budget. More than that, we're calling on the government to reinstate the funding for legal aid.

[1445]

Section 5 approved unanimously on a division. [See *Votes and Proceedings*.]

Section 6 approved.

On section 7.

J. Kwan: Section 7 deals with the Offence Act. We understand that the purpose of these changes is to remove the requirement that the Attorney General must consult with the Chief Judge of the Provincial Court before recommending a fine with respect to violation tickets. Given that the minister may no longer be consulting with the Chief Judge on these issues, what process will be followed in order to come to a decision in those matters?

Hon. G. Plant: Cabinet will make a decision based on the best advice it gets. My ministry staff regularly deal with these issues by undertaking the examination of fine levels that may already be in the statute books through similar matters. Sometimes, depending on the nature of the issue, they may look comparatively at other provinces, if we're talking about something that is a brand-new offence, and get a sense of what other provinces might be doing in the area. Then there is a recommendation that is made to cabinet, just as is the case now. Just as is the case now, cabinet will be the decision-maker.

[1450]

J. Kwan: It is unclear to me what types of offences would actually apply, which would trigger this section of the act. Does the Attorney General have a specific

list of the circumstances under which this section of the act would actually apply?

Hon. G. Plant: I said in second reading debate that there are over 350 separate fine amounts for violations of the Motor Vehicle Act and motor vehicle regulations, and a similar number for the other statutes for which violation tickets may be issued under the Offence Act. I'm also told that when the federal Contraventions Act comes into force in British Columbia, as we expect it to do later in 2005, the total number of separate fine amounts will increase to over 2,500.

J. Kwan: Yes, I read the minister's second reading debate as well, but that actually didn't give you a whole lot of information. I understand from that passage that traffic violations will be incorporated into it. What other offences are we talking about?

I understand the volume issue the Attorney General talks about, but I'm unclear in understanding the nature of the offences which will trigger this section of the act. That's what I'm interested in. Under violations around traffic items, with things like warning issues around drinking and driving would that apply? To what extent would this provision apply, and for what offences?

Hon. G. Plant: I'm advised it is primarily motor vehicle-related matters. The Contraventions Act probably.... The main subject there will be boating infractions.

J. Kwan: I'm willing to let this go if the minister will commit in writing the areas which this section of the act would apply to — if it is motor vehicle and running traffic lights or speeding, or whatever. If it is boating issues, is it about violations of boating regulations? If that's all, that's one thing. If there are other things that apply, I would like to know what they are.

Hon. G. Plant: The answer is: all of the offences which are the subject of section 132(2)(d) of the Offence Act. It's not a matter of debate; it's simply the consequence.

If the member seriously wants to know the entire range of offences, I'd be happy to entertain a letter from her making that request. We will certainly point her and her researchers in the direction of the Offence Act and identify all of the issues here.

I don't mean for a moment to discount the member's sincere interest here. This is a mere procedural change. It's a process that I frankly thought was inappropriate and unnecessary when I first looked at it. Unfortunately, it took a couple of years to get around to actually making the change. I don't think it's appropriate that we involve the judiciary in setting fine limits, and that is really what is happening here.

[1455]

We made the change in the Community Charter as it related to municipal bylaws at the time. We probably should have taken the step that's contemplated here further, and we didn't do it. Frankly, we are pretty busy most of the time in the ministry, so we weren't able to get this one up above the radar screen until now. It's not doing anything to the law except in respect to this one aspect of the requirement to consult with the Chief Judge, and the office of the Chief Judge is perfectly delighted to be relieved of this administrative burden.

I get that the member is interested in knowing what this applies to. Generally speaking, it applies to motor vehicle matters. If she wants to write a letter to me making a request for further information, I would be happy to provide it to her.

J. Kwan: I'm making that request right now, in the Legislature, to the Attorney General. The Attorney General doesn't have all of the information he says generally applies to the motor vehicle provisions, and I said: "Hey, you know what? I'll take your word for it." If the minister can provide us with the information around that, I will accept that too. We won't have to go through that list here in the Legislature at this moment.

The minister says that well, you know, he's been busy. Yeah, he has been very busy — making cuts to legal aid, no doubt. The minister says that well, this is just a procedural change. This government says that kind of stuff all the time. We know that when the government made changes to the income assistance act, they actually changed the rules around the two out of five years in qualification. They said that was procedural as well, with a whole host of others. You will pardon me, Mr. Chair, if I don't take the minister's word for it when he says it is just procedural.

Hon. G. Plant: Did you ask for a briefing?

J. Kwan: This is what this debate is about. The Attorney General is sitting in his chair going: "Oh, and did you ask for a briefing?" You know what? For the minister's information...

Interjection.

The Chair: Order, please.

J. Kwan: ...debate in this Legislature is about opposition members — and government members too — putting questions to the ministers about their bills. They are to answer those questions, Mr. Chair. That's exactly what I'm doing.

The arrogance of this Attorney General knows no bounds. Let me ask this question.

Interjection.

The Chair: Order, please. Members, let's get back on track here — section 7, please.

Interjection.

The Chair: Keep your remarks confined to section 7, please.

J. Kwan: The Attorney General can heckle me all he wants and make claims all he wants. The question that I put to him was a completely legitimate question to which he could not provide a full answer. I said, granted their track record, that I would be prepared to take something in writing from the Attorney General. Then he went on to accuse me of actually not asking a question related to the bill. Where is he? Earth to the Attorney General: pay attention to what we're doing here. The arrogance knows no bounds.

Interjection.

The Chair: Order, please. Order, please. Let's have....

Interjection.

J. Kwan: The Attorney General says I have no position on issues. We just dealt with a legal aid issue. Didn't the opposition put clearly on the record what our position is on legal aid? Didn't the Attorney General...

The Chair: Order, please. Member, take your seat, please.

J. Kwan: ...by cutting legal aid, put their position on the record?

The Chair: Take your seat, please.

Everybody, just take a deep breath here, please, and let's get back on track. We are dealing now with section 7 of Bill 4. Let's confine our questions to that section, please.

J. Kwan: I'm sure that the House Leader would be helpful.

Interjection.

J. Kwan: Yeah, saying that relevance.... Well, then, answer the question.

Mr. Chair, maybe the members in this House think it's funny when the opposition puts questions to them, and maybe they think they don't need to answer any of the questions.

I would like to know: what is the maximum fine that could be applied here?

Hon. G. Plant: I probably should have had the list. Unfortunately, I'm told there are hundreds of them. That was the point. There are hundreds of them. I will get the list, and we will probably have an opportunity

to put it on the record, because I know the member is interested.

[1500]

The general principle is that I think every provincial offence where enforcement proceeds by way of ticket as opposed to information.... That is what I am told is probably the scope and range of this. We're getting a list faxed over here of the several hundred matters that are of interest to the member.

J. Kwan: That would have been the answer for my previous question. The question I just asked of the Attorney General, which he did not answer, is this: what is the maximum fine that could be applied here?

Hon. G. Plant: It varies. I don't have the answer. There are hundreds of these fines. This is a procedural change in the process for getting a recommendation to cabinet around fine levels.

If the member wants me to engage my staff to identify the fine levels of the several hundred fines that we're talking about, I certainly can do that. It may mean a brief adjournment. But if the member wants that information, I'm sure we can make it available to her.

J. Kwan: Yes, I would. I would have thought the minister would know the information in terms of the maximum fine, but he doesn't. Yes, we will be expecting that information.

I know the government would like to minimize all of the actions as though it's somehow just procedural. Maybe it is, but it is the opposition's job to find out exactly what it is that the government is doing and what they're proposing to do. It is the government's job to provide answers to those questions, and I would appreciate the list of information when the minister is able to provide it.

The Chair: Hon. member, do you prefer to stand down the section so that you get this information?

J. Kwan: No, I don't need to stand down the section, Mr. Chair. In theory, we're all hon. members, and I'm prepared in this chamber to accept the word of the minister when he says he'll provide that information to us. I will take that as the hon. member's word.

Section 7 approved.

On section 8.

J. Kwan: Provincial Court Act. We understand that the purpose of these changes is to remove the sunset provision from the senior judges' part-time program. Could the minister please advise how many judges have participated in this program since its inception?

Hon. G. Plant: I'm advised that there are currently 16 part-time judges.

J. Kwan: Sixteen court judges. With this change, would it then take away...? In essence, will this become a permanent program? Is that what this does, or is this extending the initial pilot program?

Hon. G. Plant: The intention of the amendments is to make what has been sort of a pilot project initiative a permanent arrangement.

J. Kwan: So this is to continue it, to make it into a permanent program. The pilot program, in essence, has now ended and has now become a permanent program. I'm assuming that's the purpose here.

Could the minister please advise: is there a maximum age that applies for the judges that may continue to work under this program?

Hon. G. Plant: There is no change to the statutory provision, which is in the Provincial Court Act, in respect of retirement age. I believe the age is 70.

J. Kwan: How are the salaries of these senior part-time judges determined?

[1505]

Hon. G. Plant: I believe the way the participants in this program are paid is that they get half of the salary of a provincial court judge. The difference between that and the full salary of a provincial court judge is made up by a portion of their pension entitlement. The government does not pay any benefits associated with those who enrol in this program.

J. Kwan: Are there requirements in terms of hours of work from these part-time judges?

Hon. G. Plant: My understanding is that they work with the Chief Judge on matters related to scheduling and how many hours they're sitting and where.

J. Kwan: Are there minimum hours in terms of requirements? I understand the whole scheduling thing. That's not what I'm asking about. For a person to be a part-time judge, does that mean a person has to work a certain number of hours? I need some clarification on that.

Hon. G. Plant: We're not aware that there is any minimum number of hours. I think it's up to the judge in question and the Chief Judge to arrange to make the best use of the available time of the senior judge.

J. Kwan: I would say that may be problematic, but then again, maybe not. I'm willing to receive further information on that. Does the minister have any sense with the 16 judges that are now in this program, though, what their work hours are like?

Hon. G. Plant: I don't have that information with me. I think the issue of making sure we get some value from this is a good issue. I stand to be corrected on this,

but I also think it's fair to say that we actually get this for free. That's because there is a pension issue here — the relationship between the pension and the salary commitment. I believe the way it works is that what we do is implement this so there's no double dipping, but we're getting the advantage of some services from these individuals that we might not otherwise get.

I'm pretty sure it is a program that operates with value for the taxpayers. It has certainly been talked about for a number of years. The program was introduced as a pilot project following a joint submission made by government and the Provincial Court judges to the 2001 Judicial Compensation Committee.

The submissions made to this year's compensation committee contain more details, I think, but I do know this: an evaluation of the program was conducted jointly by the Ministry of Attorney General and the office of the Chief Judge. The evaluation indicated that there is a high level of satisfaction amongst judges participating in the program and that the program results in some cost savings to government, although these savings could not be quantified.

The evaluation did not uncover any significant administrative problems with the program in its present form. Therefore, the province and the Provincial Court Judges Association, along with the office of the Chief Judge, recommended to the 2004 Judges Compensation Commission that the program continue in its present form. That was a joint submission made to the Judges Compensation Commission.

Yesterday that portion of the Judicial Compensation Commission was approved unanimously by the House, so I know it enjoys the support of the opposition. All this legislation is doing is putting in place, mechanically and legislatively, the arrangement that was referred to in the judicial compensation report and that was approved yesterday.

[1510]

J. Kwan: Yes, I recall what was passed yesterday, but the question with this bill, of course, is a little bit more specific around this section of the bill in terms of the salary range and the range of work hours that apply to the part-time judges.

It would be interesting, I think, for the public to know what that looks like versus a full-time judge, for example. That's why I ask these questions. I appreciate that the minister doesn't have the information, but if at a later time, he can gather the information and provide it, I would certainly appreciate that.

One last question. There are 16 judges, as I understand from the Attorney, that are participating in this program. Is it the anticipation of the government that there will be more folks joining this program now that it's going to be permanent, or is it just to allow for the 16 to continue? I suppose if, over time, those numbers roll over and there's change within that roster of individuals, this would actually allow for that to happen.

Hon. G. Plant: The 16 number that we used earlier is just a snapshot. The number may go up and down

from time to time depending on the individual decisions of part-time judges made by way of an election under section 9.1(1) of the Provincial Court Act. I don't think, frankly, that we have any particular expectations about those numbers one way or the other. I'm sure the Chief Judge has a sense of what she thinks the members of her court are likely to do generally, but these are decisions made by individual judges, not by the court as a whole.

Really all we're doing here, I think, is removing the sunset provisions that exist in section 9.1 of the Provincial Court Act. I don't think this legislative change will precipitate any significant change in the number of elections that are made by those who want to become part-time judges.

Sections 8 and 9 approved.

Title approved.

Hon. G. Plant: I move that the committee rise and report the bill complete without amendment.

Motion approved.

The committee rose at 3:13 p.m.

The House resumed; Mr. Speaker in the chair.

Report and Third Reading of Bills

Bill 4, Attorney General Statutes Amendment Act, 2005, reported complete without amendment, read a third time and passed.

Hon. G. Plant: I call committee stage debate of Bill 3.

[1515]

Committee of the Whole House

MISCELLANEOUS STATUTES AMENDMENT ACT, 2005

The House in committee on Bill 3; J. Weisbeck in the chair.

The committee met at 3:17 p.m.

On section 1.

J. MacPhail: This amends the Crime Victim Assistance Act. I understand that the purpose of the change is to expand retroactively the application of crime victim assistance so that it will now include people who have been injured or killed in the course of their employment, so long as they weren't covered by the Workers Compensation Act or the Government Employees Compensation Act.

My question is: what has happened with people who have been injured or killed at work in the past who have not been covered by the Workers Compensation Act?

Hon. G. Plant: Under the Criminal Injury Compensation Act, these individuals were eligible for benefits. When the Crime Victim Assistance Act came into force, the effect of the act was to deny those people benefits. Since the coming into force of the Crime Victim Assistance Act, which was apparently June 30, 2002, anyone who would have applied for these benefits who fell into that category would have been denied them.

I don't know how many such applications there were. Staff may have the answer to that. The intention behind making the amendment retroactive would be to ensure that any of those individuals would, in fact, be entitled to benefits under the Crime Victim Assistance Act.

J. MacPhail: As I understand it, there was a group of people who were adversely affected in June 2002. Does this amendment make them now whole?

Hon. G. Plant: Yes, but only to the extent that they now have the right to make claims under the Crime Victim Assistance Act.

J. MacPhail: Yes, I meant whole in terms of being eligible to apply.

Are there any exceptions that one knows of in terms of the people who were denied?

Hon. G. Plant: We know of no exceptions.

Section 1 approved.

On section 2.

J. MacPhail: On section 2, we have amendments to the Expropriation Amendment Act, 2004. I understand that the purpose of these changes is to allow regulations to be made to overcome any transitional difficulties arising from the amendments to the Expropriation Act affected by the Expropriation Amendment Act, 2004.

Can the minister explain what types of transitional difficulties may arise from the amendments to the Expropriation Amendment?

[1520]

Hon. G. Plant: What we are trying to do is wind up the Expropriation Compensation Board, and what we would like to do is transfer as many of the cases that were on the waiting list before the board to.... Let me back up a second.

I think what we're trying to do is wind up as many of the cases that are before the board as we can so that the transition away from the board into the Supreme Court is as seamless and smooth as possible. I think there were a couple of issues that have been identified

along the way where there was some concern that the language of section 21 wasn't quite broad enough to achieve the efficient transfer of cases that have to be transferred to overcome any transitional difficulties that might arise.

One of the things I think we discovered was that while we knew about some parts of the caseload in the Expropriation Compensation Board — we thought we had a pretty good handle on that number, and it was a manageable number — it turns out that upon going into the files at the board a little more thoroughly, there is a much bigger volume of cases that were never properly closed. They were adjourned or were in some way held in limbo.

I know that one of the challenges around transition is to make sure we have the power to deal effectively with those cases. I think there was just a concern that section 21 of the Expropriation Amendment Act, 2004, didn't create quite enough space to deal with all of the potential transition problems that could arise, and so we're trying here to give cabinet the regulation-making power that will ensure that we can wind up the board as quickly as possible. Those cases that arise will be transferred to and heard by the Supreme Court.

J. MacPhail: The Attorney General refers to giving cabinet regulation-making power. Exactly what the legislation says is that cabinet can make regulations to prevent, minimize, resolve or otherwise address these transitional difficulties, and then cabinet is given a two-year period to make these regulations.

Can the minister state exactly what the two-year period is and why a two-year period was chosen?

Hon. G. Plant: The point of the two-year period is to make sure the job is done so that we don't drag this out. The ability to assist in transition through these regulations has, if you will, a little sting in the tail that says: "Better get the job done within two years." I'm not sure that there's any particular science to why it's two years or one year or three years.

I do know, as I said earlier, that there's a bit more involved in this transition than had originally been thought, so that probably explains why it's longer than three months, six months or nine months. I guess two years is an attempt to strike a balance, to make sure that people have the time to get the job done properly but that they're not squeezed so unreasonably they don't do an effective job.

Section 2 approved.

On section 3.

J. MacPhail: Section 3 is a very interesting section. It extends the time for which the new Forest and Range Practices Act will come into force. It was supposed to come into force on January 1, 2006, and now the government is extending that until January 1, 2007 — a full year's delay.

Other than Health budget estimates, I have spent the most time debating laws affecting the Forest and Range Practices Act, either through changes to the Forest Practices Code or changes to this legislation. We've had law upon law upon law to bring in this new system, and now we see that it's going to be delayed by a full year.

[1525]

In December of last year, December 2004, the Sierra Club put forward a report called *Axing the Forest Service*. It was released, and here's what we learned from that. Here's what we learned on the record of this government since they came to power in 2001. Eight hundred jobs have been lost in British Columbia's forest service since the Liberals came in and started cutting. On average now, each B.C. Forest Service employee is responsible for 18,000 hectares of forest land, an area equal to 45.... I used Vancouver's Stanley Park.

There we are. That's what the government's record is. Their promise in the *New Era* document, which has been completely discredited.... But let's look at what their promise was: "A B.C. Liberal government will streamline the Forest Practices Code to establish a workable, results-based code with tough penalties for non-compliance." Here we are 90 days before an election — 90 days — and we have this government extending for a full year their regulatory and environmental compliance changes in the forest sector. Just 90 days before an election: "Oops. Sorry, we can't deliver on that promise."

Now, Mr. Chair, I have to tell you: I'm not disappointed that they can't deliver on their promise, because the previous system certainly has proven effective compared to their new proposed system. We see why. We see that. The proof is in the pudding: it's delayed by a year.

Let me ask the minister. I'm not sure which minister is going to answer these questions — but whatever. I see the Minister of Water, Land and Air Protection here.

Is that you, or is that...?

Interjection.

J. MacPhail: Sustainable Resource Management. I'm sorry. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

What I do know is that here's what the president of the Association of B.C. Forest Professionals recently wrote to the Premier. He wrote to voice his concerns about the lack of resources that this government has set aside for forest research, inventory and forest health.

Oh, and government made a big announcement about what they're going to do about all of those in the budget earlier this week — a hollow promise, we now see. A hollow promise because they've now introduced legislation to delay the whole thing by a year anyway.

Let me quote Rick Sommer, the president of the Association of B.C. Forest Professionals:

"As your government enters the final months of its mandate and as you consider priorities for a possible second term, we urge you to carefully consider the con-

cerns raised by the Sierra Club" — that's the report I mentioned before — "and ourselves and to critically examine whether, in terms of its impact on forest stewardship, the level of resources is appropriate to continue to support good forest stewardship."

To the Minister of Sustainable Resource Management: doesn't he agree that it's a bit ridiculous for a government to be making such important changes on issues that are of such critical importance 90 days before an election?

Hon. G. Abbott: I think what's ridiculous, actually, is the Leader of the Opposition depending on highly questionable sources for her information. I think what's ridiculous here is the suggestion being made that somehow this is a piece of legislation that she's not going to embrace at the end of the day, because I'm sure she will.

There is nothing nefarious occurring here in this section.

Interjection.

Hon. G. Abbott: There is nothing nefarious occurring here. In fairness to the Ministry of Forests and its personnel, who are working very hard to deal with some very difficult situations, I think what's being proposed here makes a lot of sense. What we are dealing with in this province, among other things, is an unprecedented mountain pine beetle situation, on which the Minister of Forests and the Minister of State for Forest Operations — the entire Ministry of Forests — are working mightily to try to keep in hand.

[1530]

I know this is a situation that almost defies management in its magnitude. Clearly, that has stretched the resources of licensees. It has stretched the resources of the ministry as they try to cope with the extra — and there are many extra — cutting authorities that are required to try to meet the mountain pine beetle epidemic.

It is literally spreading in all directions. The only way to deal with it, apart from hoping for a protracted period of 30-degree-below weather back in November-December, is to try to get in front of it, try to catch up to it and try to manage the edges of the epidemic. That is what the Ministry of Forests is striving mightily to do, and I think they're doing the very best job they can.

Clearly, to try to deal with that unprecedented and unique situation in the context of the policy change that's contained in section 3 and in the other shift from the code to the new Forest and Range Practices Act is a difficult one. They have had to cope at the ministerial level and at the licensee level with not only mountain pine beetle. That's the principal challenge. Also, of course, there are forest revitalization changes that are occurring in terms of the 20 percent takeback for first nations and communities and woodlots, and so on. Again, that is a challenge.

[H. Long in the chair.]

There is no incompetence here. There is no nefarious activity here. This is a responsible response to a very difficult, unique, unprecedented situation that is facing the ministry and facing licensees. This will ensure that we do, in fact, get the very best protection and the very best management of our forests in the province.

J. MacPhail: Once again the minister manages to insult professionals in the field. He just insulted Rick Sommer, the president of the Association of B.C. Forest Professionals, by calling him a nefarious source. In fact, Mr. Chair, it is typical of this government to insult anyone who disagrees with them.

Let me tell you what the incompetence is. Yes, we have an unprecedented pine beetle infestation — a pandemic. The incompetence is that in a crisis time this government can't cope with anything, because in the early days of its office it slashed to the bone any public service resources to deal with situations. The forest revitalization is a situation of their own making. The remaking of the market pricing system is of their making entirely.

Because they slashed to the bone and took away 800 jobs in the Forest Service — the average work area for one Forest Service employee is now 18,000 hectares — this government has to delay the reforms by one year. The ministry is in absolute chaos. They have no resources to deal with the problem of the pine beetle. They're in complete chaos, and they threaten our industry by their incompetence.

That's what people are saying, and that's why they're forced to delay their own legislation from being implemented by one year. It is shameful. I guess if anybody was actually looking at the debate in this Legislature, this would be a front-page story — but not this government. Because of their own disregard for public accountability, they're not subject to scrutiny. In any other jurisdiction this would be a front-page story of gross incompetence.

Hon. G. Abbott: I'm disappointed, Mr. Chair, that the....

Interjection.

Hon. G. Abbott: Can I not respond, Mr. Chair?

Interjection.

The Chair: The minister has been recognized.

Hon. G. Abbott: First of all, for the member to suggest somehow that the Ministry of Forests has not done the best they can to manage the mountain pine beetle situation.... If her argument — and I think she has abandoned the argument; it appears so now — is that somehow under the NDP this situation with the mountain pine beetle was being effectively managed, she is absolutely wrong. This is an epidemic that got out of hand during the NDP's tenure, because they were un-

able to come to grips politically with dealing with that very difficult situation.

[1535]

Further, I have had the opportunity on a number of occasions to meet with the Association of B.C. Forest Professionals. I have great respect for them. I am certain they will understand, given the unique situation we face, that this in fact is the right step to take. I suspect they would be very supportive of the change here.

If anyone is being insulting, it is — as is so typical of the Leader of the Opposition — that Leader of the Opposition herself who, during her time in government and during the time in government of a number of NDP Forests ministers, never took the opportunity to sit down with the Association of B.C. Forest Professionals to learn about their concerns and help move the policy framework forward. This is, as is typical of the NDP opposition, a typical drive-by shooting in the public policy field.

Sections 3 to 19 inclusive approved.

Title approved.

Hon. G. Plant: I move that the committee rise and report the bill complete without amendment.

Motion approved.

The committee rose at 3:37 p.m.

[1540]

The House resumed; Mr. Speaker in the chair.

Report and Third Reading of Bills

Bill 3, Miscellaneous Statutes Amendment Act, 2005, reported complete without amendment, read a third time and passed.

Hon. G. Plant: I call budget debate.

Budget Debate (continued)

Hon. G. Plant: I am absolutely delighted to have the opportunity to speak this afternoon in support of, I think, a groundbreaking and truly wonderful step forward in the history of our province: the balanced budget for 2005. It's a great tribute to the hard work of the Finance minister and, frankly, I think a great tribute to the hard work of the Premier, cabinet and government caucus members over the last three and a half years. We have taken the great ship of government and have turned it around so that it is charging ahead with speed and gusto.

We have also, I think, helped put in place the ingredients of a sound economic recovery in British Columbia that truly is realizing on the promise that we made to the people of British Columbia in the spring of

2001 when we said: "Elect us and we will deliver a new era for British Columbia." We promised a vision for hope and prosperity for the next decade and beyond. British Columbians have hope and they are enjoying prosperity.

I sat in this room for five years as an opposition member of the Legislature — sat and listened while the former government, the NDP, tabled budget after budget. Every year it seemed to me that they came up with a new idea for a new plan. They threw out the plan they had introduced the year before. They cooked up some new plan. They called it something else. They set new targets. But what you saw year after year under the old regime was a consistent failure to meet targets, a consistent failure to stick to a plan and, frankly, legislation and initiatives that were more designed to throttle initiative than to empower citizens — legislation, programs and policies that treated the entrepreneurial spirit like a whipping boy, that said government expansion for incomprehensible purposes knew no limits.

We saw a government that couldn't manage the projects it undertook. It sold the people of British Columbia on ideas that it then proceeded to manage into the ash bucket of incompetence and overspending, with the result that, as others of my colleagues have said in the course of this debate, the people of British Columbia were starting to feel a bit low when we got to the end of the decade of the 1990s. They were starting to wonder if there was in fact a future in this province. They were wondering why it was that we were no longer leading the nation.

The answer was, in my view, pretty clear. It was because we were badly governed. We were badly governed throughout the 1990s, and it is a subject of some astonishment to me that when I look at the landscape of what is promised by the NDP for their pursuit of electoral success in the spring of 2005, I see a whole bunch of the same people that drove this economy into the tank for the 1990s standing for office once again.

[1545]

People who said that balanced budgets were a crime against humanity are now running for office on behalf of the NDP. People who supported the fact that the former government made commitments they had no intention to fund are now running for office. I ask myself why. Presumably so they can enjoy the thrill of once again making promises they have no intention of fulfilling.

I sure know in my heart of hearts that when we get to the polls in May of 2005, the people of British Columbia are going to see through that. They're going to realize that what has helped turn this province around is discipline, making a plan and sticking to it and putting in place the key elements of economic renewal and prosperity. That's what we're enjoying today in British Columbia.

For the first time in a long time, over the last year or so, I have felt a great sense of excitement around this province. I think that great sense of excitement is given wings by this budget. This budget, I think, is a great

signal to the investment community that British Columbia is a place to come and invest. It's a great signal to the citizens of British Columbia that this is a government that cares about the public interest; that cares about those who need our help the most; that's willing to make the investments in the critically important public services like health care, education and public safety; that's willing to rethink how we deliver those services so that we focus on outcomes and we don't just worry about hiring more public servants to do things the same old way.

This has been the recipe. This has been the plan. It's working, and I am really just absolutely thrilled that I get the opportunity to stand here and support this budget as a vision document and a plan that will take us through and into the next years, the years that the Premier calls — and I think rightly so — the golden decade that lies ahead just on the doorstep for all of us as British Columbians.

We know what it's like to be governed by a government that has no plan, no discipline, no sense of commitment, no sense of an idea beyond their reaction to the nightly news. That was the dismal decade. We've now seen for four years a government that does know what it means to have a plan, that's willing to make tough decisions and willing to actually do what's in the public interest for British Columbia today and tomorrow. This budget, I think, shows that when you have a plan and you stick to it, all kinds of things become possible.

This budget also shows that the power of a strong economy lies in the choices that it gives us all as citizens. It gives us, as government, the opportunity to actually put in place programs and services that will help make a difference where a difference is most needed to be made.

I was listening to the radio a couple of nights ago in the first aftermath of the budget speech here in the House and listening to people argue and debate about aspects of the budget. I turned to the person I was with and said: "You know, it's hard to understand what could be wrong about a budget that says we're going to have the largest one-time reduction in provincial debt in the history of the province — step one. Step two, we're going to take 330,000 British Columbians who now pay provincial income tax and remove them from the provincial income tax payment rolls — period. Then it says to another 400,000 British Columbians — those of the lower income brackets — that we're going to reduce their taxes."

We've paid down debt. We've lowered the tax burden on those British Columbians who can use the help the most. Then across the spectrum in health care and education, in public safety, in the environment — in area after area — we've got the opportunity to make, and we are making, strategic choices and investments to ensure that programs are there, that programs can grow and do the work that they have to do, that health authorities have the tools they need to ensure that they deliver strong health outcomes for all British Columbians, that school districts have the resources they need

to continue to do the good work of improving education outcomes across the province, that the advanced educational institutions and colleges can work with us as we continue to implement our promise of putting in place 25,000 new post-secondary spaces in British Columbia. Again, on issue after issue, this is a budget that I think delivers what British Columbians need and want and deserve.

[1550]

When the Minister of Finance stood up to begin his budget speech, he said something that I thought was pretty important and powerful then and that needs to be said again. He stood up and introduced the budget as a balanced budget, and he said that it's balanced in more ways than one. I think that's important for a couple of reasons. First of all, it actually takes tough work to be able to manage the demands and expectations that exist on the part of people, who will always have great ideas for how government should make money, in a way that ensures that for two years running you balance your budget with the prospect — in fact, the virtual certainty; I'm convinced of it — that we can deliver balanced budgets into the foreseeable future.

Balanced budgets are good for the economy. When government lives within its means, government sends a message to the private sector that this is a place to invest. Government sends a message to citizens that we won't tax your children to pay for today's programs.

Balanced budgets are a great start for any government. In fact, they're not just a start; they're an essential precondition, in my view, for maintaining responsible government in British Columbia. It's a fact that you could lose sight of if you sat here, as I did, year after year in the 1990s, watching as the former NDP government introduced deficit budget after deficit budget. It was as though deficit budgets were, somehow or other, a good part of our economic system. I think the reverse is so.

I think it's hugely important for government to balance its budget, to maintain discipline on what it does — knowing that that's not easy, knowing that in fact that means making tough choices, but also knowing that if governments can live within their means, then governments are doing a lot. That sends a tremendous message to the economy that helps encourage and empower investment and initiative and entrepreneurialism around the province.

The Finance minister said that this budget was balanced in more than one way. It's those other ways that are equally important, because the fruits of our labours in this House over the last three and a half years and the fruits of the hard work of four million British Columbians day after day are the increased revenues in the government. Those fruits are an economy that's humming along at growth rates that promise consistent prosperity in the years to come. The revenues that we get as government give us choices and opportunities. I think the decisions that the Finance minister and the government have made here with respect to how to take advantage of those opportunities show real balance.

What we did in 2001 as the inaugural act of our term in office by implementing a 25 percent across-the-board income tax cut with as much as a 28 percent reduction in income taxes for low-income citizens was a great step forward in encouraging the economy of British Columbia. I'm really delighted, having now seen the results of that investment in a stronger economy three and a half years down the road, that we're able to actually take this next step and say to low-income British Columbians that we think we can lighten your tax burden even further.

The initiative in this budget that will essentially reduce to zero income taxes payable by all taxpayers earning up to \$15,600 a year is a great message about the possibilities that I think we all should be excited about — the possibilities that are there for us when we are prosperous, when we are strong, when we are disciplined. The fact that we can offer tax relief to 400,000 more British Columbians to lighten the load of government in their lives is, I think, also a great step forward.

[1555]

I asked myself over the last couple of days: who is opposed to this? What is the nature of their opposition? I was asking myself that question yesterday afternoon when I came into the House. Shortly after the commencement of proceedings yesterday afternoon the Opposition House Leader had the opportunity to stand up and make her contribution to the budget debate. I was particularly interested in hearing the Opposition House Leader's contribution to the budget debate yesterday afternoon. The NDP went out of their way yesterday to kind of fertilize the air of the public debate in British Columbia with powerful allegations about stifling debate and all that great stuff that oppositions are good at doing. The NDP were masters at doing all that stuff themselves when they were in government, but now that they're in opposition they've discovered new virtues that were hitherto unknown to them when they sat on the government benches.

Nonetheless, there it was. The airwaves of British Columbia were full of lonesome, woe-filled complaints about having our intentions to deny a voice to the opposition on the budget. I came into the chamber yesterday afternoon and got my rules of procedure out. I know I probably shouldn't need to do that, but I wanted to be sure. Yes, there it was. I found that the Opposition House Leader gets to speak for two hours on the budget. That's quite a remarkable opportunity — two hours to stand up and offer her views to British Columbians about the budget that had just been tabled.

I could tell you that no one is occupationally more suited to fill the air with the sound of her voice for two hours than the Opposition House Leader. It would not be a stretch of her abilities as a legislator to find words that would occupy a two-hour slot in the Legislature. Knowing that this was a matter of great importance to her, knowing that she was out there pounding away, lamenting about the fact that we were stifling her opportunity to debate, I thought: I'm going to come in here, sit down, settle myself down, and just listen and

learn for two hours while the Opposition House Leader tells me about what's wrong with the budget and offers the NDP vision for a new decade of whatever it is they're going to offer when they finally get around to putting some kind of a platform out for public display weeks and weeks and weeks from now — or maybe they'll break that promise too.

After all, we should trust Carole James. I know that she really, really desperately wants to end union and corporate donations to her political party, but that's about the only thing I think I've heard her say. But I pause. I apologize for that digression.

I sat there, I waited, and I watched. I sat there, and I got ready for what was going to be a two-hour exhortation — I was sure of it — but it ended after 30 minutes. It ended after 30 minutes. I wondered. I was startled.

Here's an opposition that says we're denying them the right to speak about the budget when the rules give them — give the opposition leader — two hours. As I said, I think if she really had a lot to say about the budget, she could have filled two hours. She could only speak for 30 minutes before she ran out of things to say about the budget. She ran out of anything to say about the budget.

During the 30 minutes I listened and I listened. Where is their sense of vision and hope for British Columbia? Nothing — absolutely nothing. I heard nothing from the opposition about what their ideas are for British Columbia. In fact, I didn't even hear them criticize anything that's in our budget. All they can do is lament about cynicism or impute motives.

The reason the opposition can't oppose this budget is because it's a powerful, strong statement of vision for British Columbia. It's got good ideas, good program initiatives. It's based on a sound framework of fiscal principles. It's a great budget. The surest evidence that it's a great budget is that when the NDP were actually given a chance to speak in this chamber for two hours about it, they ran out of gas after 30 minutes. Boy, it's sure kind of strange to watch the media buzz around the province for hours and hours yesterday — "Opposition complains about being shut out of budget debate" — when they had a chance.

Actually, maybe it was more in their interest to rail about things outside the House than to do it inside the House. Inside the House we actually get to listen up close. We get to test what they're saying, whether there's anything to it. Outside there in the court of public opinion it's a different world. Maybe they're actually the ones who want to get out there in the court of public opinion and debate the programs and policies of this government. That may be so. I look forward to that debate. We will have that debate soon enough.

[1600]

For me right here, right now in this chamber it is a great delight to speak to a budget that I think does offer the promise to British Columbians of a golden decade of opportunity. It organizes that promise around goals that, as the throne speech calls them, are great goals. They are truly ambitious goals. They cause us as citizens, as legislators, to reach out just a little past

where we can touch. They give us a sense of what the road ahead might look like if only we had the courage to seize the opportunities that lie before us and to actually make them real.

As citizens we all have hopes. All of us have hopes. Too often we keep our hopes shovelled away in our pockets. We're afraid to bring them out for public inspection. We're afraid to kind of hold them out in our hands and say that these are our hopes, because we know that we live in a world full of cynics. Cynics never built roads. Cynics never learned how to do heart surgery. Cynics never reached out to help a student with their homework. Cynics never amounted to much.

This budget and this throne speech are built on foundations of goals that cause us to think about what our hopes are as citizens — our hopes for the society that we live in, this place called British Columbia. Why not hope that we could be the most literate jurisdiction in North America? Why not say that we will work to realize that hope just a few years down the road?

Why not make promises and commitments about our ability to manage our resources in a way that leads with standards of environmental sustainability? Why not make those commitments to ourselves and set those goals? We have set those goals for ourselves. Why not commit ourselves to be as healthy as we know we can be? Why not make those sorts of commitments and set those sorts of goals?

This budget builds on that framework and foundation of those five great goals for a golden decade and begins to put in place a framework of programs and to establish priorities that will allow us to reach those goals. I think it's going to be an amazing journey for us in the years to come, as we in this chamber set those compass points and do what we can as legislators to help all of us as British Columbians to reach the goals of that golden decade.

As a minister responsible for the treaty process, I think that the years to come hold out the promise of a truly new relationship with first nations in British Columbia founded on trust. We can work together, knowing that when we work together, there is no limit to what we can achieve. The treaty process, the idea of building certainty through relationships and the idea of reconciliation are not just about a project where we take resources from one party and assign or transfer them to another. With a shrinking pie it is about realizing that if we work together, we will open up access to stranded assets. We will create economic opportunities that will benefit first nations, and they will benefit all British Columbians.

We are seeing the signs that that is so in communities around the province — communities like Yekooche, for example. The members of that community — surrounded as they are by a traditional territory that is beset by beetle infestation and knowing that just half a dozen years down the road there will be very little in the way of economic value in the forest resources around them — have actually decided to turn their attention to prospecting, because there are mineral

resources surrounding them in their communities. They've decided to become engaged in that work to learn how to exploit and ultimately, we hope, to explore, develop and discover mineral resources and to create economic hope and opportunity for their communities and for the region.

Yekooche is just one example. It's a small example, but it's a concrete example of what can be done when first nations, governments and the private sector all decide they've got to work together and build trust, build relationships and create opportunities by working together rather than by shouting at each other across walls.

[1605]

The treaty process is fraught with challenge. It's complex for reasons that were built into its original design. It has created inflated expectations that are almost impossible to realize for the parties to the negotiations, particularly for first nations.

But we're very close to success. We're very close to success at four tables in the province, where final agreements are within reach. The coming weeks will certainly test the resolve of the negotiators for all of the parties at those tables. But I think there is a shared willingness to try to make and reach agreements.

This budget makes sure that the treaty negotiations office has the negotiation resources it needs to do the work to get success. We will certainly do everything we can in the treaty negotiations office to cross the finish line and to get agreements as soon as we possibly can.

This budget also makes a very strong statement about government's commitment to community safety. Financial resources are being given to communities to increase policing — through the 100 percent return of traffic fine revenues, through the maintenance of grants to municipalities for policing, and through the \$122 million committed over three years to enhance policing with new resources for courts and corrections — to ensure that we really can respond effectively to the reality of crime in British Columbia and to the reality of the concern that we need to do more to keep our communities safe. In the Ministry of Attorney General we have new resources to help ensure that if the police get out there in communities and investigate the bad guys and get the evidence needed to prosecute, we will have the resources in my ministry to undertake those prosecutions.

We've made a significant step forward in enhancing access to justice for people in British Columbia who are experiencing conflict or who need help resolving legal issues in the family law area. With this budget, the government of British Columbia will now spend \$35 million a year providing family justice services across the province to low-income British Columbians. We actually will spend \$10 million a year more on family justice and family law initiatives than we spend on criminal legal aid, but we are doing it in a way that is smarter and more effective than it had been in the past. We're doing it in a way that focuses on helping people get the outcomes they want, rather than simply by

funding processes that encourage adversariality and breed unhappiness and misery more often than they create satisfactory solutions.

We're doing it by recognizing that sometimes you can help somebody solve their legal problems just by giving them some information about what their rights are. Sometimes you can do it by giving them a road map for how to undertake the process steps that they need to take to get a remedy or to enforce a claim. Sometimes they can get the result they want by undertaking mediation or by engaging in other forms of alternate dispute resolution. There are certainly cases where the best way to resolve the problem — perhaps it's the choice of last resort but the necessary choice — is to take the problem into a courtroom.

The spectrum of assistance that we now provide with the \$35 million we spend a year on family justice is a spectrum that encompasses all of those things. It includes parenting after separation. It includes a family maintenance enforcement program that actually delivers on the promise of ensuring that child support orders are enforced to thousands of British Columbians. We do it by providing, through the agency at the Legal Services Society, family court duty counsel, which we're now going to be able to install on an ongoing basis in 44 courthouses around the province.

With the money this budget promises, we're going to be able to take that program and expand it into the Supreme Court. We're going to make sure that we have the resources there to help those who are in severe conflict get the help, advice and representation they need in order to protect the interests of their children or to protect themselves if they're at risk of harm.

There is more that we can do. I know there is. But this budget takes great steps forward. They are progressive steps. They are ways that say that the old way of doing things is not necessarily the right way. We need to focus on how we can achieve the results that people want and think about new ways of achieving those results.

[1610]

That's true. That's true of the treaty process and what we've tried to do over the last three years in the treaty process. It's true of what we're trying to do across the range of services that constitute the justice system in British Columbia. It's true across the range of services encompassed by a budget that reaches into families and helps families across this province in all kinds of ways.

This is a budget that's a forward-looking document — a visionary document founded on bedrock principles and on the certainty that we are turning the corner, that British Columbia truly is on the verge, the threshold, of a golden decade. It's a great moment to be British Columbians. It's a great moment to be part of a government leading this vision. I'm delighted to be standing here supporting this budget, and I look forward to the continued comments of my colleagues.

M. Hunter: I always seem to get to speak after people who have a real gift of the gab — eloquence, I

would call it. But I will try, at least in substance, to match what the Attorney General has just offered to this budget debate. I, like he, stand very proud to support the budget introduced by the Minister of Finance just a couple of days ago.

What a wonderful place to live, work and play. That's not what I say. That's what the world thinks about this province today, and what a change that is from just four short years ago. We must keep telling ourselves and telling the people of British Columbia how bad it was. The NDP drove families away from this province. They drove investment away from this province. Their tax-and-spend policies reduced personal incomes of people in British Columbia by an average of over \$1,800 in the dismal decade of the 1990s. That's how bad it was, and that's why people left.

Worse than the personal hurt and disruption that their policies and that government caused, this province missed out on the most rapid and sustained period of economic growth that the western world has ever seen. Just think about that for a moment. Here we are, located where we are, with links to Europe, to the Asia-Pacific, to the United States and beyond. And here we were in British Columbia, the only place in the western world that went backwards through the 1990s. Well, we're changing that. That's what the Minister of Finance showed in his budget.

What a change we see now from four short years ago. This is a government that keeps its promises. The opposition likes to try to tell people how we have broken our promises. Mr. Speaker, I'm here to tell you that this government keeps its promises. Promises made by this member and by my colleagues in this government caucus are promises that are kept. We made 202 promises to the people of British Columbia in the *New Era* document. We have actually acted on and completed 193 of those promises — 97 percent — and the other 3 percent are being worked on.

It is the party opposite that can't keep its promises. Why do I say that? What evidence do I have for that? Let's look at what they did to seniors during their dismal decade, because they're pretty active trying to tell people that we're ignoring seniors or that we're not dealing with them in a way that is sensitive and appropriate. I reject that.

Their own think tank, the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives — and I use the words "think tank" very judiciously, because I'm pretty sure it's a contradiction in terms for that organization... Nevertheless, the CCPA said about the NDP: "Community and continuing care has been seriously eroded over the past decade." They're talking about the 1990s. "Hospital stays declined by almost half in the 1990s, with no parallel investment in community and continuing care. Between 1994 and 1999 the number of public long-term care beds fell by 18 percent."

Even the NDP's friends in the CCPA could not believe how badly that government treated our seniors during their decade of misused power, and they have the temerity to stand in this House and outside it and accuse this government of mistreating seniors. I think

that's an argument that does not stand the test of even a very distant microscope.

It was under this government that the first-ever review of seniors care facilities in this province was conducted in the year 2002. That review found that the average age of seniors facilities was more than 30 years old. Many were overcrowded; many had poor security. Some could not accommodate modern wheelchairs and other equipment that is used to help make seniors' lives comfortable.

[1615]

Did the NDP have a plan to fix this? Did the NDP have a plan to deal with an aging population that they knew about? This is not new. This has been around since 1946. These questions are rhetorical. I know that. We all know the answers.

What a change in four short years, because this is a government that does have a plan. It's a plan we set out in 2001. It was then, and it is today, a plan to rebuild and energize the British Columbia economy. It was then, and it is today, a plan to maintain, build and improve important public services including health care and education, because those are priorities that the public of B.C. demands we pay attention to. It was and is a plan to be accountable to the public for their money.

In my opinion, how a government treats their citizens' money is the acid test of openness and accountability, and this government is the most open in that respect in the country. Every penny of revenue and every penny of expenditure is open to public review. The Opposition House Leader knows this. She knows, from her own experience in a government that deliberately fudged public budgets, how open and transparent this government is. So pardon me if I doubt her sincerity in her meanderings on this matter of how open the debate is about this budget.

Let me move on to what this budget does. Let's look at how it builds on the progress of the past four years. This budget reduces or eliminates income taxes for three-quarters of a million of our neighbours — people who live in our communities, people who work in our communities, seniors who are on fixed incomes. Three-quarters of a million people are going to benefit from this latest reduction in British Columbia personal income tax.

That is hugely good news. That means that people are going to be able to spend money that they don't have today. The same is true with Medical Services Plan premiums. Another almost quarter-million people are going to have their Medical Services Plan premiums reduced or eliminated. What does that mean to a senior couple living in my community, in Nanaimo, who might be earning through their pensions or through a combination of income sources \$30,000?

In the coming year, that couple is going to pay \$2,400 less in British Columbia income tax than they did when we came to office. That's \$200 a month to cover their expenses, to provide maybe a little bit of the odd treat they have not been able to afford. On the MSP front, senior couples earning less than \$29,000 a

year will pay nothing for medical coverage in this province.

This is a government that cares very much about seniors and about families. These tax changes are just another indication of that commitment to our senior citizens and to the working families of this province.

This government cares about our children. That's why we are making the largest single attack on the public debt of this province ever. The \$1.7 billion that will be applied to our debt is to reduce the charges on our children's future, because this government believes that our children's future cannot be mortgaged to cover current operating costs. That's what the NDP did through the 1990s. That's why the debt of British Columbia grew from \$17 billion to \$34 billion in ten short years. That government wrote off Crown corporation debt at B.C. Rail and B.C. Ferries. They covered operating costs by creating debt that costs us money today and into the future. From \$17 billion to \$34 billion of debt in a decade — they dragged us down. But in four short years, what a change.

There is more money in this budget to meet the educational needs of our province. In the kindergarten-to-grade-12 school system, we are seeing an \$863 increase in per-capita student funding over the term of this government. The \$150 million committed in this budget this year to K-to-12 education is the largest single increase toward education spending ever in British Columbia. This government cares about our kids. It cares about our education system, and these investments are being made at a time when the student population is in decline.

[1620]

Everybody in the province, except the B.C. Teachers Federation and their public advertising, knows there are fewer students. Perhaps people don't know that there are 29,000 fewer students in our grade school system, in our public education system, than there were in 2001. The students that are there are benefiting from more resources in a system that not only provides more financial support and more resources but also welcomes their parents and volunteers into their schools.

At the post-secondary level we're meeting the challenges of a society that is demanding more and more education services in order to function in a world that we all know is becoming increasingly complex. In my own community, at Malaspina University College in Nanaimo — which I am confident, Mr. Speaker, will be taking up the challenge of seeing how it too, like the university in your community, can become a special purpose university in the months to come — there is significant investment by this government and by the private sector in improving the facilities that exist there. We have new research facilities in shellfish, a first in Canada. We have a library that is going to improve services not just to the student body at Malaspina University College but to the entire community. We have private sector investment at Malaspina that has built an international studies centre without a single cent of taxpayers' dollars.

Our investment in children, our investment in education, is not all. This is a government that is determined to improve community services and to improve public safety. Balanced Budget 2005 contains significant spending increases in these areas. Not least — in an area to which I would like to draw attention — is the largest increase in contributions to women's transition houses in 15 years. And \$37 million is going to improve our ability to offer services to women who are fleeing violence, to children who witness abuse and to programs that are associated with those unfortunate facts in our society.

It is regrettable that the demand for these services seems to be growing. I don't have an answer to it. I don't know if anybody has an answer to it. What I do know is that the experts in the field — the people who are spending their lives and their professions dealing with women and families, and men, who are having problems in coping with violence and aggressive behaviour — deserve our support. I think our response is appropriate and necessary if we are ever to break the cycle of violence that is an unfortunate feature of our society here in B.C. I want to congratulate the Haven Society in Nanaimo for its work and innovation in finding ways to stretch resources and to get community help to supplement the public investment in their services.

There are more resources in this budget for children's services, for policing and for infrastructure around the province. It provides more resources for community living services, services which look after the needs of adults with disabilities. This budget supports the largest increase in B.C. history in social assistance benefits to people with disabilities. This budget funds those increases, which are the first of their kind in these benefits to people with disabilities in ten years.

I submit that despite the blather from the opposition about how this government doesn't care about people with disabilities, the evidence in this budget is quite the opposite. If they didn't fund increases in disability assistance, they don't really have much of a ground to stand on, because they didn't do an awful lot for this deserving and needy group of citizens. This budget starts to make a change in the ability of those people to live fulfilling lives.

As well, I think it's worth noting that this budget responds to all of those people across this beautiful province who took the time to offer their thoughts to the standing committee of this Legislature and to the Minister of Finance last fall. You know, we have heard a lot about openness in the last few hours from the opposition members. Not one of them has made the observation — so I will — that this budget is a process of not just the machinations of the mind of the Minister of Finance or his predecessor or his cabinet colleagues or this caucus. It is the product of a consultation process that invited every citizen of this province to participate, to tell us what they thought their resources should be applied to.

[1625]

This budget addresses those priorities that were identified by British Columbians, and I want to thank

all of those people who took the time, the effort and the brainpower to contribute to helping us decide where those resources would go.

Our plan for British Columbia is once again clearly laid out in this balanced budget for 2005. Like the budgets that have come before it, it presents a plan that we intend to follow. It presents promises that we intend to keep.

There's not much difference between public finances and household or personal finances, except the numbers are much bigger. But just like in balancing your own budget in your household or your own chequebook, you have a financial plan. At least, if you are successful in managing those accounts, you have a financial plan. We all know from personal experience that a financial plan only works if you stick to it.

The opposition, however, wants us to believe that everything was doing fine in British Columbia until we came along and had the temerity to reduce taxes — personal taxes and business taxes. You know, that proposition is so full of holes that it barely bears repeating, but it needs repeating because it's the same balderdash that gets repeated week after week, day after day.

The people of British Columbia, at least the ones that live in my community, know they're better off today than they were in 2001. They know things aren't perfect. I'm the last person to suggest that they are. But my constituents know their jobs are more secure than they were.

Let's look at one example: Madill engineering. Madill is a worldwide-known manufacturer of forestry equipment in my community. I had the opportunity to visit their facility back in 2001. I saw a manufacturing facility that was almost a ghost town — hardly anybody working there, nothing going on, no investment, no innovation. The place was just getting by. There was barely enough energy to put grease on the machinery's wheels. Well, that has changed. Today Madill employs twice as many people as it did just a short year ago. It is a success story. It is bringing young people from across Canada to work in my city of Nanaimo.

[H. Long in the chair.]

I had the fortune to visit again, with the Minister of Forests, just a few short weeks ago. We walked on the shop floor. I didn't meet a single employee who had been there more than six months. That's how dynamic that company has become in taking advantage of the new economic opportunities across our province. Those people in that manufacturing company, I would submit, are more secure than they were in 2001. In fact, most of them weren't even there in 2001. But they are more secure; they have more choices.

You know, people in this province, and again in my community, know that the value of their houses increased. They know that the NDP has no plan to move this province forward. They know that the real leader of the NDP, Jim Sinclair, wants to take us back to 2001. How do they know that? Well, because he said so.

In my own constituency the NDP candidate is focusing on personal attacks on me, because he has nothing and his party has nothing to offer the people of Nanaimo except the past. The person who claims to be leader of the NDP, Carole James, promised no personal attacks. I guess she can't keep her promises — just like her broken promise to tell B.C. what her platform is, because I haven't heard it yet. All I've heard is that she wants to take us back too. "I wish we were four years back," she said on CKNW yesterday. Well, I for one don't share that wish. I'm glad we are where we are, I'm glad we've left that dismal decade behind, and I'm glad I'm part of a government that is working hard to help the people of British Columbia turn this place around.

My opponent in Nanaimo from the NDP says the citizens of my region deserve a government that will bring economic prosperity to all citizens, not just their wealthy friends. He's right. That's this government, and that's this budget that's going to do that.

Never in the modern history of my community have more people been at work. Unemployment rates are at generational lows. As for the allegation that the benefits of B.C.'s economic recovery are only for the wealthy, I suggest that people who believe that go tell the 4,400 people in my community who have left income assistance benefits in the last four years for the workplace that things aren't better. Tell the 1,600 people who have obtained employment through the efforts of the Job Wave program, all of whom are now able, all of whom are now able to build their resources and their families' future. Tell them that the benefits of this economic recovery are only for the wealthy.

[1630]

It simply isn't true. It's time for the NDP, for my opponent, to cut the Marxist rhetoric, take a look at the facts and observe what is really going on in the city he thinks he should represent.

I can tell you that, like other areas of the province, residents of Nanaimo are seeing improvements to their health care facilities that were promised and never built by the NDP. Seniors in Nanaimo are benefiting from a combination of private and public investment in seniors housing that I'm sure others in the province must envy.

The Leader of the Opposition and the sometime president of the B.C. Federation of Labour, Jim Sinclair, want you to believe that B.C.'s economic recovery has everything to do with commodity prices and low interest rates. I'm well aware and the people I represent are well aware that low interest rates are, of course, a benefit to them. They also know, however, that low interest rates benefit friends and family in other provinces of Canada, because it's the Bank of Canada that deals with interest rates in this country, not the provinces.

Why is B.C. doing so much better than Nova Scotia or New Brunswick or Quebec or Newfoundland and Labrador? Or Ontario or Saskatchewan or Manitoba? Only one province remains ahead of us, and we're going to get them too.

Could it be that the recovery in British Columbia has something to do with a government that has reduced taxes and red tape? Could it be something to do with a government that has outlined a plan for the province and followed it — a government that has met its financial targets and beaten its own financial targets year after year after year? Could it have something to do with making B.C. competitive for investors to the point where British Columbia today is the most attractive location for foreign investment in this whole country?

Could our economic recovery have something to do with a government that encourages small business with competitive small business tax rates? This budget makes another step in that direction with a \$400,000 exemption for small businesses. Small business in this province is so confident that its small business confidence index tops the nation.

Could our economic recovery have something to do with a government that has created the environment that has allowed the private sector to create some 200,000 new jobs in British Columbia since December 2001? There are over 2 million people working in this province for the first time in its history.

The NDP and its union bosses say: "No, it can't be that. It's commodity prices." Well, that's not supported by the facts either, but what else is new?

With the help of the member for West Vancouver-Capilano, I did a little bit of research on commodity prices. It would be interesting to this House, perhaps, to know that back in 1995, in the good old days of Mike Harcourt and the NDP, the industrial materials index of the Bank of Canada, which includes things like copper and coal, stood at 132.17. In 2004 the index stood at 129.93. The commodity price monitor of the Royal Bank of Canada Financial Group shows similar data. The venerable magazine the *Economist* actually says that commodity prices have been going down since 1854. I don't remember that long ago, but I do remember 1995.

I do recall that in 1995 investment was leaving this province, that investment in mining and fishing and forestry was leaving the province to the point where one in two miners lost their jobs. I know that in 1995 the NDP was talking about the jobs and timber accord, which promised 22,000 new jobs and resulted in the loss of 10,000 jobs. Talk about false promises to people and breaking promises. That was at a time when commodity prices, according to the Bank of Canada index, were higher than they were in 2004.

[1635]

This economic recovery is certainly assisted by low interest rates. Nobody in their right mind would deny that. But it is also about the way this government has acted to change the economic and regulatory environment of this province. You see it in the confidence that people have around your community. You see it in the confidence that people in my community express.

As in all aspects of life, continuous improvement should be our guideline. We have much more to do.

Not one of us on this side of this House is satisfied that B.C.'s potential has been reached. In fact, many of us, I suspect all of us, think we've barely scratched the surface.

One of the things this budget talks about and the throne speech talked about was a new focus on the Asia-Pacific, and I fully support the notion that B.C., as Canada's gateway to the Asia-Pacific, has a huge role in lots of development.

I hope that as we explore and exploit those opportunities, we don't turn our back on the United States out of frustration over its trade practices which, frankly, are not appropriate. I hope we don't forget our ties — cultural, historic and trade — to Europe. I regret that Canada has allowed those roots to wither over the last decade or two, and I think British Columbia, with its rich and diverse background of people from all over the world, can offer a lot to Canada in re-creating and re-energizing some of those cultural and trade ties with Europe. I know that the European Union is a tough place to do business. I understand that. But we in British Columbia need to remember that London is closer by air than is Tokyo. Frankfurt is closer by air than is Shanghai. We need to remember that as we go about reconstructing this province.

Not one of us on this side of the House is satisfied that the challenges of an aging population, in housing or in medical services, are overcome. In fact, I think we know what the other side does not appear to know, and that is that these are going to be lifelong challenges for all of us. We are all getting older. There are fewer people working to support folks who are aging, who are on pensions and who need the expensive medical care that, unfortunately, comes with an aging population.

What we do know is that we have a plan to address these issues. We have a plan represented by Budget 2005 — Balanced Budget 2005 — to distribute the benefits of a strong economy as and when we can afford to do so. This budget, most importantly of all at this time in our history, outlines a clear choice for British Columbians in the weeks and months ahead.

We can go forward. We can build on the positive changes we have made since 2001. Or we can choose the Jim Sinclair path, which, in his words, is to go back to 2001. We can choose between a government that is investing in services for the people of British Columbia or a party that is controlled by the private interests of public sector union bosses.

I know where I stand. I know that I'm proud to support this budget and to run on a record of promises made, promises kept and a plan for a bright and exciting future for my province.

R. Hawes: Like my colleagues before me, I'm very proud to stand up and speak to this budget, which I think is a culmination of the four years of hard work all British Columbians have put in and which has completely vindicated the position we took when we were first elected, found the cupboards bare and embarked on a program to restore our economy. We said from

early days that it was going to be a road with lots of bumps but that we were going to arrive at a place where we would have a better province.

I just want to go back in history, just briefly, and cover some of the revisionist history that the NDP would now be putting out and wanting people to believe and what actually has happened.

[1640]

If you listen to the rhetoric that comes from the NDP — from Carole James to the people in here, to Jim Sinclair and the other NDP leaders — you would think that the world was perfect until 2001 and that in 2001 all kinds of ills befell this province. But in 2001 the people of this province, in unprecedented numbers, repudiated the leadership and the management style of the NDP and said in huge numbers that they were not satisfied and that our province was in just terrible trouble.

Now the NDP are praying that in the intervening four years people's memories will be very short. They're trying to put themselves out as a government that was sound, fiscally responsible and friendly to business. That's the revisionist history.

The facts are that when we took government, the first thing we did was make a tax cut, because we knew we were in tenth place out of all provinces. We were last place for economic growth, and one of the biggest reasons was that we were grossly out of step with our tax rates. Our neighbours had much lower tax rates, and that was attracting the kinds of businesses and the kinds of skilled people that we needed in this province to build an economy. They were leaving for a friendlier tax climate.

We did make the tax cut very early in our four-year tenure and shortly afterwards completed a real in-depth assessment of where we stood. What we found was that our economy and our fiscal situation was actually in far worse condition than we had thought — not so much that the bottom line was worse, although it was. We found we were facing a structural deficit of nearly \$4 billion.

We found that the budget that the NDP claimed to have been balanced and that the auditor general confirmed was balanced — the budget that was left to us — was actually balanced on some one-time revenues and with a whole bunch of unfunded liabilities that were going to carry forward and that we inherited, such as the.... At the time of the election in 2001 there was a pending settlement with nurses that was very expensive and one with doctors that was very expensive. There was even, among other things, a mental health plan they had announced for \$125 million that was desperately needed in this province, and not a penny in their budget for it.

All of their rhetoric around a balanced budget.... When you look at it, what we inherited was a mess, so the cleanup had to start. It was not so much that it was a huge deficit we were facing, but the spending trends were out of control.

I remember our Health minister saying in the fairly early days.... He stood up and, I thought at the time,

made a very brave statement for a minister, saying: "My ministry's spending is completely out of control." That was the legacy he was left, and he spoke the truth when he said it. He embarked on a tough program to bring spending under control.

All through the health care revision and the changes that were made, no cuts were ever made in health care spending. The whole objective was to get spending — the increase in spending — to a controllable, sustainable level. We have been very successful with that in a complete restructuring of health care, but it hasn't been without pain.

The pain is actually going to continue for some time, because you can't restructure a system overnight that was as broken as the health care system was. You can't do it in four years. There's still some heavy lifting to do. There still has got to be more work done within the health care sector because of the aging population. Our baby-boomers, as we move through, are going to create such pressure on our health care system over the next few years that we can't possibly support it without just a complete restructuring of how we deliver services.

What we inherited wasn't working. We had a litany of promises. As Corky Evans — one of the venerable NDP stalwarts who is running again, who wants to come back and deliver his homespun rhetoric — said: "We promised things we never intended to build."

The Abbotsford hospital, the MSA Hospital, is a really good example. Through the entire reign of the NDP, that hospital was promised year after year. There were announcements made, and they were out with their shovels and hard hats in the field, but not one time did they put money into a budget until three months before their last election. Then they claimed, and they're claiming today, that they had plans to build that hospital, building plans, and were ready to go.

[1645]

Well, at that time I sat at the regional district on the health board, and I can tell you that there were no plans to build a hospital. There was discussion, but there were certainly no plans. We were not consulted. At the regional district and local government level, as 40 percent payers.... I can tell you that the local government would have known if there was any plan to start construction on a hospital. It didn't exist. The revisionist history is actually.... For people who have been there and have lived very close to what they're saying, it's appalling. It's unbelievable.

What was going on in this province.... The simplest way to put it, I guess.... Now, I'm going to put on a banker's hat. I spent many years as a banker. We spent a decade buying our groceries on our Visa card. That's what we did. We spent a decade running up \$17 billion in debt with nothing to show for it. It wasn't to build infrastructure. It was unhealthy debt.

I think back to the days.... Many years ago, as a banker, I remember a client I had once who was buying his groceries at the corner store. He was in terrible.... He couldn't make his bank payments on his loan, or he was perpetually behind or late. I remember sitting

down to try to give him some debt counselling. As I went through his budget, I found out he was buying all of his groceries at the corner store at a price that was probably double what the supermarket would charge.

I asked him: why would you do that? Why would anyone go to the corner store and buy meat, bread and eggs at double the price? He said: "They give me credit. They let me charge my groceries. I'm a month behind on that. What I buy this month, I have to pay for next month." He said: "At the end of the month, when I write my cheque to pay them what I owe them for the previous month, I have no money left to go to the supermarket. They don't take credit, and so I'm locked here in the corner store. I can't get out." His family was living hell. That's what happens when you're in a debt spiral. You have no choices. You're locked in.

That's where we were heading as a province. We were going to have no choices. The debt load we were carrying and the spending spiral we were in would have taken us to a place not far down the road, where debt servicing on what our debt might have become would have eaten up whole ministries in this government, destroyed services and taken away all choices that government has and that the people of this province need to have. That would have been destroyed by the mismanagement we witnessed through a decade.

Now the new leader emerges: Carole James. "We've changed. We're not the same." But I go through the list of candidates they've already nominated, and they are the same. The truth is that the real leader — big labour through Jim Sinclair — is still there, saying: "Let's go back. Let's go back to 2001. Let's go back to charging the groceries on our Visa card. Let's go back to where my organization, the B.C. Federation of Labour, is in charge of the province. Let's go back to where we will remove choices." That's exactly what would happen. That's not going to happen.

We've put forward a budget now that, if you link it to the throne speech that was made a week ago — a throne speech that projected a vision for the next decade; a throne speech that, for me, is about families.... All of it, everything that was in the throne speech.... When I put it all together in one summation, I would say it's about building stronger families. Everything in the throne speech is about that, because that's why we're here.

We're not here to balance a budget or build big surpluses; we're here to build families. Every person in this place has a family. We care about them, and we care about the people we serve. That's what we're about here. That's what the throne speech was about. The budget is a reflection of the throne speech, and it lays out your financial plan for three years. Incidentally, that's called planning — something that never happened before. It's an innovative thing that, frankly, is something that's widely accepted everywhere else in business — something the NDP wouldn't have understood.

[1650]

That reminds me of something. Speaking to the care home manager in the city that I live in, she tells me

that under the HEU contract her employees worked under, they have a retirement allowance. I just want to give this as an illustration of where things went in that previous government. The retirement allowance pays employees one week's pay for every two years of service. If you have an employee who has worked for 30 years, 35 years, that retirement allowance can be a fairly substantial amount of money. If in any given year you have a number of people retiring, the total amount to be paid out in that retirement allowance could be very large.

It's never been in the budget of the care home, so what used to happen was that she would make a phone call to the ministry and say: "I've got a retirement allowance to pay out. I need X dollars." It didn't matter how much it was. It wasn't in the provincial budget either. The Health ministry's budget reflected not one penny for this huge, multi-multimillion-dollar liability across government. So they would just write a cheque, and when they ran out of money, they would go to Treasury Board or put through a special warrant and just get more money. It didn't matter where it came from. It's like the old saying, I must not be broke, because I've still got some cheques left. That's the way they seem to have run government.

We have changed that. We have actually brought financial stability to running government. We have brought the same kind of philosophy that you or anyone uses running their own household: if you haven't got the money, you don't write the cheque.

Early in our term we promised a balanced budget by 2004-05. After filing our first budgets, the press just broadly panned that, saying: "It is not possible." The opposition were really on it: "Simply not possible. Can't be done."

Well, we had a plan. We stuck to the plan. Through that period I recall reading so many articles from the pundits that a caucus this size can't possibly stick together. We were going to blow apart at any moment. Not only did we stick together, but we have been completely united through a very difficult period of time, first, because of the leadership of the Premier, and second, because we knew the goal we had set was achievable if we stuck to it. We did stick to it. We believed it was the right thing to do. People who are on a course they believe is right and righteous do have a lot more sticking power.

We were right. We have been vindicated. We know that building a balanced budget and a surplus has nothing to do with just having a balanced budget and a surplus. It has everything to do with making choices. That's what it was all about. We are not going down to the corner store to buy our groceries. We have choices, big choices, and we're making them.

We went across the province in the fall, and we asked people: "What do you want us to do with this surplus?" And we listened. The opposition, the NDP, are saying: "Oh, we're just.... This is all election spending. They should stop the election spending." I wonder which one of the programs we have announced, which dollar of spending, would Carole James not make?

What does she object to? Does she not want to listen to the people of the province?

That's what we've done. From early, early in our term we said that we're going to build a surplus. Then we're going to ask the people how they want us to deliver services, and what services. We have done that. We've done precisely what we said we were going to do.

The usual suspects are out panning our budget. I know from talking to people who were in the lockup — when the press and the labour leaders and all those who would make comment on the budget are locked up early in the morning.... They're given a prelook at the budget so that they can understand it before the Finance minister stands here in the Legislature and delivers the budget speech. I've talked to some people who were in the lockup, and what they say is that most of those who are opposed to our party and our government — most of them — breezed into the lockup about noon.

[1655]

They had zero time to go through it. They didn't take part in the discussion when the Finance minister laid it out. They weren't interested in what the details of the budget were. They had already written their scripts. They were already going to say it was a bad budget, no matter what was in it, because that's the nature of opposition. They oppose, so they were just doing their job.

The Attorney General stood in this House a few moments ago and talked about how they fill the air. Well, that's what they're doing. They're filling the air with vacuous statements that, frankly, were written before they had.... I suspect that many of them haven't read the budget even now. They don't really know what's in it, nor do they care. They are looking for something completely different.

Those who have taken the time — those who do work in our province to help build an economy that provides jobs, who make investments, who risk their own money in this province — what are they saying? I think that's what is important. I think if I were working for someone and looking for a paycheque, I would be looking to hear what he's saying. Is my paycheque going to be stable and secure? Does my employer feel safe in his investment? Is he going to grow the company that I work for, or is he going to start taking money out or think about moving and leaving me with nothing? I would be very interested.

I'm going to start with the Chartered Accountants of British Columbia. We don't need an explanation. These are folks who do the books and who are....

Interjection.

R. Hawes: My seatmate here from Malahat—Juan de Fuca, being a chartered accountant himself, knows just how credible the chartered accountants are. They're saying: "After a period of economic decline brought on by high taxes, deficit financing and excessive red tape, we are now seeing the rewards of an improved in-

vestment climate in the province." Gosh! Deficit financing. High taxes. Excessive red tape. That sounds awfully like the NDP, and that's exactly what they're talking about.

Then: "We know that a strong economy and competitive investment climate pay enormous dividends for the province — providing the financial capacity to fund the programs British Columbians need." I think what they're saying is that if you build a strong economy, you don't have to buy your groceries at the corner store. I think they're saying that gives you choices.

The chartered accountants support the government's continued use of conservative fiscal policies, including using forecast allowances and contingencies to ensure that fiscal targets are met. That is account-antese, and for the folks who don't pay a lot of attention to what accountants say, what they're basically saying is that we've built safeguards into our budget and into our projections to make sure that they're met. If there are unforeseen occurrences, we're going to be able to look after them. If forest fires again ravage our province, if the beetle infestation gets worse or if we have more flooding, we can look after it, because we have built in the contingencies to do so.

The chartered accountants went on to say that the B.C. budget is now the most transparent in Canada, adhering to generally accepted accounting principles. "B.C. is a leader in Canada in open, transparent and accountable financial reporting." That doesn't sound like what the leader of the NDP was saying earlier today. Maybe she knows more than the chartered accountants. Maybe she has more skill at interpreting a budget than the chartered accountants. I think her record throughout the 1990s should probably be stacked up against what chartered accountants know.

The Investment Dealers Association. The investment dealers are the brokers who handle investment money, anything from joint venture money to all of the underwriting and the money from growth funds and how that's invested. These are the people who move money from its source to its investment destination, and they are incredibly important to the economic future of any province. So, what are they saying?

[1700]

They, like the chartered accountants, are saying the budget process in this province is the most transparent of any they've seen in any province — and at the federal level as well. Bar none, no province has been as transparent. For them and their clients that's incredibly important, because investors — especially big investors — want to know that what the province is saying about its economy is factual and correct, that the direction they're setting for where the province is going to build programs and spend its money is also credible, that it is not going to destroy business and that it is sustainable.

When you build programs that aren't sustainable — which is really borrowing for your groceries on your Visa card — sooner or later there is a price to pay. The investment community understands that governments that do that usually look to the most successful in the

economy to gather more tax dollars, because that's what they need. They have to survive on more and more tax dollars.

Investors flee that kind of market. The Investment Dealers Association says that the debt reduction, which is the largest in our history, is a tremendous advance. We have a plan to increase borrowing in future years for strategic infrastructure investment that the investment dealers say is extremely prudent and wise.

What they're saying — we asked them, "What is your advice to us?" — is that the first thing we should be investing in is transportation infrastructure, particularly in the Prince George port and highways to be able to move things from that port. They say that's the one thing that's going to bring massive foreign investment dollars into this country. Improving transportation in the lower mainland for the port of Vancouver so that goods can move from Vancouver through that terrible traffic morass, which anyone who lives in the lower mainland understands, is the second thing they said is going to bring tremendous investment.

The Olympics are a huge move forward. They are embracing all of the things that are in our capital plan as things that are going to attract more investment dollars into the province. They have said that our debt-to-GDP ratio will continue to fall because our economy is growing. That in itself is a tremendous feature, because the bond rating agencies — the people who actually rate our credit — will, they believe, increase our credit rating, which decreases our interest rates, giving us more money to spend on the programs we want.

The Investment Dealers Association also spoke about the tax cuts we made in 2001, the ones that the Leader of the Opposition in the House here continually gets up and pans. She calls it tax cuts to the rich, tax cuts to the corporations. That means tax cuts to the people who are supplying jobs. The Investment Dealers Association says that the way the investment community works is not immediate. When there's a change, they sit back, they analyze, and they plan their investments — a unique feature that is foreign to the NDP: planning. When you make a change in taxes, investment money doesn't just immediately jump without sitting and making a plan on how and where they're going to invest the money.

What the Investment Dealers Association says is that the current surge in investment and the tremendous turnaround in our economy is largely due to government initiatives like the tax cuts and the deregulation initiative. The initiative to cut one-third of regulation in three years is unheralded. The fact that we sat down and actually counted the number of regulations and put in place a very vigorous program to cut red tape and unnecessary administration has been heralded across the investment community and is largely responsible for the return of a lot of the investment dollars we're now seeing coming back to this province.

[1705]

We have become an investment mecca. The eyes of North America are on British Columbia. The Investment Dealers Association is telling us that in the

United States, although they have a massive operating deficit, they have what they call a huge capital surplus, and they're looking for places to place money. They're not looking in Ontario now. They are looking in British Columbia. We have become the most attractive investment destination in North America. According to the Investment Dealers Association, the one impediment — if there is one — the one little hurdle left, is May 17, because the investment community can't come here if there's a return to the NDP's method of running a government.

If you think about it, you understand it. If you think about the rhetoric, when they talk about who they should tax and who is the target for taxes, it's the most successful. The NDP philosophy is to take those that are successful and cripple and punish them and bring everyone down to the lowest common denominator so that the successful companies are hobbled and crippled and working on the same level with the companies in free enterprise that have been mismanaged and have to rely on government handouts. The idea is to take money from the wealthiest — I'm talking on a business level — from the most successful, wealthy companies, and give it to those who have shown that they haven't the ability to manage or make progress.

The successful companies generally are mobile. They are able to move to better environments where they are welcomed, and I can tell you that they weren't welcomed here. So the investment dealers speak loudly, and if we're not listening as a people in this province, I think we're missing a very important boat.

I can see the lights are signalling that we're coming to a place where I've got to wrap up a little bit. I did want to say briefly that in 2001 we made over 200 promises. We put them in writing. I remember the Premier holding up the new-era commitment book and saying: "Put this under your pillow. Tick off the promises one at a time, and in 2005 take it out and hold us to account." We've kept 97 percent of those promises. No government in the history of this country has made promises that were as transparent as we have, nor has any government kept the number of promises that we made.

When somebody approached former Prime Minister Chrétien with his red book and said, "You've only kept 70 or 75 percent," he said: "But 70 percent's a good mark." I can tell you that 97 percent is a much better mark.

I do want to say to those, like the opposition, that talk about gaming, for example.... They like to say we broke a promise, that we've expanded gaming. Under the NDP, when they brought in gaming, I remember the conflicts with cities. I was a mayor at the time, and I know what was going on. They were forcing gaming into communities that did not want it. There was huge conflict at the municipal level. This government has said that no gaming goes into any community that doesn't want it. Are we expanding gaming? It's up to the public to decide. I can tell you that if the public doesn't want gaming, then it won't come to their community. I think that's pretty fair.

I am proud of our budget. I'm proud of our record of keeping promises. I'm proud of our plan to restore this province, and I'm proud to be a British Columbian — much prouder to be a British Columbian under this government than I was under the government that created a have-not place.

Thank you for allowing the time.

B. Kerr: I've been listening to my colleagues here, and a number of us have spoken on the same theme. That's the theme about the opposition's reaction to our budget. Surprisingly to me, they've been exceptionally polite, because I have never heard such sanctimonious hypocrisy in the four years that I've been in this House. It is absolutely disgusting.

[1710]

In the throne speech we came out with a vision for the future. Let's elevate that. Let's elevate the discussion. Let's elevate the debate on this. Let's talk about the vision that we had. Do you agree that we want to be the most educated province in Canada? Let's discuss that. That's an important goal that we set up for the people. Do you want us to create more jobs per capita than anybody else in Canada? Again, that was part of our vision. Let's discuss that. Do you want us to be the healthiest population when we go into the Olympics in 2010? We're talking about sports. Should we go in there with our youth being the healthiest people in Canada, along with our seniors, which I will be? In 2010 I'll be 65 years old. Let's discuss that issue.

Interjection.

B. Kerr: I know. Some people can't believe that, but it's true.

An Hon. Member: I thought you were much older.

B. Kerr: Some people thought I was a lot older — exactly.

Do you want us to provide the best support services for people in need? These are the goals we set out in our throne speech. These are the things that should be discussed.

[J. Weisbeck in the chair.]

Then in the budget, we lay out how we're going to get there, how the money's going to be spent to get us there. There's some real meat that we could discuss, that we could debate on a really high level. Did they meet that challenge? No, they did not. Maybe it's like me when I invest in the stock market. I always seem to buy high and sell low.

Here I came out with this great plan that we could elevate the debate. We could move forward in British Columbia. With the opposition adding and contributing to the debate, maybe we could come out with a really great plan for the future of British Columbia.

What does the opposition do? They act like a bunch of children in a grade school schoolyard saying: "Liar,

liar, pants on fire." They would not even raise the debate above that. I find that absolutely disgusting, so I'm not going to be quite as polite as my colleagues were.

You know, they've lost their moral compass.

R. Hawes: Did they have one?

B. Kerr: Well, that's debatable too. We can debate that issue of whether they have ever had a moral compass, particularly when you look at their past transgressions.

One of the members in the House said the other day that the opposition's job is to oppose everything and contribute nothing. Well, in that area they're doing a good job. There's another saying that came out, not from here but from a long time ago: if you tell a lie big enough and often enough, people will believe it. That's exactly what they're trying to do. Tell the big lie often enough, get it out there — frequency in reach, as we say in the advertising business — and some people are going to believe that.

Let's not debate the issues. No. Why should we debate the issues? Let's not debate what we want for this province — the vision that we want for this province. No, let's not do that. Let's just call the government liars. Let's oppose the budget, but not by talking about the things that are in the budget. We'll just say the government lies.

I'd like to put to rest the argument that they're putting there and say what they're talking about. One of the things — if I had a dollar for every time I heard this, I could retire comfortably — is Campbell's cuts to health care. It's a mantra. I heard one of the members in the opposition say it today when they were presenting a petition: cuts to health care. Only the NDP math could take a \$2.5 billion increase in funding and call it a cut. Let's put that argument to rest right now. There have been no cuts to health care. Furthermore, we're going to increase funding to health care for an additional \$3 billion by 2008. That's a 30 percent increase.

Now, what else have I heard? Cuts to education. We've heard that so many times. Sadly, the member beside me here mentioned the chartered accountants. The chartered accountants got sucked in. They came out with a report. They do it. They monitor us quite closely. They hold our feet to the fire. They came out with a report card on whether B.C. is the best place to work, live and invest, and they talked about the fact that funding for health care had not kept up to inflation and the other pressure spending that the school boards have to do.

I challenged them on that, because we see the numbers. There have been no cuts to education. They went back and redid their numbers. As it turned out, what happened was they hired an independent consultant and that independent consultant, in turn, hired another consultant. He went to the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives and used their figures. As it turns out, the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives just missed out, I think, \$360 million in funding. They said that doesn't get included. "Although you'd given it to the

school boards, it wasn't part of the operating budget that you said at the beginning, so we won't count any additional funding."

[1715]

Well, that additional funding was meant to cover the cost pressures, and it did. The new numbers came out, and education has been funded fully for cost pressures, for inflation and for teachers' salaries. It's been covered fully, so I want to put that argument to rest.

No cuts to health care and no cuts to education, yet we still hear that mantra paraded out day in and day out. I will say that at one time the media was saying that, but they seem to have caught on to it now. They're not into that as much as they were before.

One of the most despicable things that I think this opposition has done is this: they've taken the most vulnerable people in our society, people on disability, and they told them that we were going to kick them all off disability.

J. Bray: Shameful.

B. Kerr: That was shameful. It was.

These people are vulnerable. They were concerned as it was. They're not living high off the hog. To then be told, when they're disabled to begin with and may have multiple barriers to employment, that they're going to be kicked off welfare and kicked off disability payments.... What are these people going to think? Then they blame us. They blame us for causing this concern with that community.

Well, we didn't cause concern in that community. We added 6,000 more people to the registered disabled. What did we do? We gave them the largest increase in the history of this province, more than the NDP did in the last ten years. But no, they've got to go out and give this misleading information to the public. They say it over and over again, when they know full on that it is not correct. Shameful.

I say they've lost their moral compass because they won't stand up and discuss the issues. Instead, they hide behind these untruths and mislead the public.

I know this past week — we've heard it in question period — they've been talking, trying to hold us to account for not building sufficient long-term beds. They've implied that we didn't care. They've implied that we've broken a promise because we didn't build the long-term beds. We made a commitment that we would build 5,000 additional long-term beds. I believe we've built 4,000 long-term beds but not additional ones. I think it's closer to 5,000, but not additional ones. We found out some of the beds that already existed had to be eliminated, so we transferred people into better living conditions.

I'd like to read you something, if I may: "The area where B.C. has really fallen short is in its investment in health care infrastructure. The government has spent almost nothing on new buildings and equipment. Serious shortages in long-term care beds have had ripple effects throughout the health care system. The recent crisis in hospital emergency rooms is but one effect of

these shortages." Is that the NDP talking about us? Is that what's happening now? This was written in 2000 by the NDP's friends, the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives. That was written about the NDP.

I'd like to read something else, if I may. They've talked about a poor 90-year-old woman that's been out in the street. Quite frankly, that's a terrible thing. I'd hate to believe it. In fact, I have trouble believing that actually happened. Here's another apocryphal story, again from the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives. This was written November 1, 2000:

"A 100-year-old woman, almost totally blind, has all her home support services cut. A 90-year-old woman loses her home support services, has a stroke, ends up in the hospital and spends the rest of her days in residential care. A woman in her fifties, disabled with MS, has her home support hours reduced to the point that she has to move from her home to an institution. Tens of thousands of British Columbians are denied access to the community-based services they need to stay healthy and live independently in their communities."

This is the story of our struggling community and continuing care, and this is the story and the legacy that the NDP have left us. That's in the year 2000. Between 1994 and 1999 the number of public long-term care beds fell by 18 percent, and they have the gall to stand up and criticize us. The hypocrisy, Mr. Speaker, the hypocrisy of this.

We made a commitment, and although I won't be around to see it, I am convinced that it will happen. We made a commitment to have those long-term beds by the end of year 2008, and I am convinced that it is going to happen.

[1720]

The other thing they're going at us for is that we can't be trusted on all the promises we made. We make the budget, and they just stand up and say: "They've broken all their promises in the past, so you can't trust any of the promises they have now." Let's debate this issue. We had the courage to come out with some commitments before the next election. We made some campaign promises. Yes, we did. We put them into a fully written up document called the *New Era* document. That *New Era* document had something like 201 commitments, on every aspect of society, of what we wanted to do to make British Columbia a better place to live, to work, to bring up our families and to invest.

What's our record? Up to now we have lived up to 97 percent of those commitments — 97 percent. We laid out a plan before the last election. I believe the member for Victoria-Beacon Hill is going to go into that in a little more detail, so I'm not going to go into it. We laid out a plan, we stuck to that plan, and we worked towards that plan. But God forbid that the NDP should let the public know about that. No. Just every time we say something: "Campbell lies." Excuse me for using the word. I'm using a quote here. To me, I find that the worst type of debate possible.

Now, since we're on that topic, I just want to read some real results. Let's just talk about some issues here, about promises and results. The NDP record: "We will

not spend more than British Columbians can afford." That's the NDP platform. What did they do? They introduced five separate fiscal management plans. Not one target outlined in those plans was met. In nearly every category — deficits, debt, management and spending — the NDP missed their promises year after year, including eight consecutive deficit budgets and two fudge-it budgets. Tax-and-spend policies reduced British Columbia to a have-not status in 1999.

Let's look at our record — honestly balance the budget without cutting funding for health care and education, pass real balanced budget legislation, and introduce a dramatic cut in personal income taxes. What have we done? We've met or exceeded every significant budget target. Deficit surplus targets were exceeded in every budget. Significant tax reductions were made throughout the term. Debt targets were exceeded in every budget. Spending targets were met in every budget, and funding increases were made in health care and education. That's just one of the things. But no, they wouldn't believe that we would do this. You know, we have made some promises, and we've kept them.

One of the other issues they go on about is that they've been saying we are not transparent, we're not disclosing everything, and we're not allowing them to debate. Well, quite frankly, we found out that they've had the opportunity to debate and they've refused to do it. I would like to read something now — again, doing some reading — from the auditor general of British Columbia. This is a person that I know the NDP opposition really respects, because they throw out his name quite a bit.

I'd just like to read his comment about what we have done with regards to our fiscal management and transparency about the budget documents and what we're doing with public accounts. This is quoting from the auditor general's report.

"A considerable improvement from six years ago, when the financial statements were published almost eight months after the year-end. We think this is a noteworthy accomplishment, because the summary financial statements are a central figure of government financial reporting and one of the key ways for government to tell Legislatures, policy-makers and the public how it has administered public resources."

It said:

"The government of British Columbia either already followed or has committed itself to adopting most of what makes up the best practices across Canada, and for the second consecutive year, for example, the financial statements were published within three months of the year-end."

That's quite an improvement. But there's more. It doesn't end there.

"The news for British Columbians about their government's financial reporting is good. In February of 2004, for the first time in the history of this province, the government can table a consolidated plan that includes all the financial operations, and we commend the government for its resolve in ensuring" — now, wait for it — "that British Columbia's public accounts are the best in Canada."

[1725]

That's quoted from the auditor general — "the best in Canada."

I'm getting very passionate about this, Mr. Speaker, as you can tell, because I'm quite proud of our accomplishments. We've all worked very hard to attain these accomplishments, and I'm very proud of our record in that regard.

R. Hawes: I've never seen a passionate accountant.

B. Kerr: Well, some accountants can get passionate.

Where were we? Let's just take a look at where we were before we started our journey to where we are now. We had one of the worst track records economically in Canada. We've had deficit after deficit budget financing. We had become a have-not province. The government was rudderless. It was going through minister after minister. Nobody was setting policy for the ministries. It didn't know what direction it was going. They were preparing one budget on an individual basis. We, on the other hand, have to do it three years out, so we do have a bit of a plan and know what's going on. Not a bit of a plan, we have a solid plan.

That's where we were then. Things were so bad. When I talk about the rudderless and the moral ineptitude of that former government.... The last budget prepared by Paul Ramsey, after he prepared a budget showing the consolidated accounts, where they planned to take it.... You read through, and on page 95 of that budget he said: "We can't do it. Given the revenue forecasts, we will not be able to meet our budget targets." Not only did he say that, he said: "Given the constraints, there will have to be significant tradeoffs if we want to do that." They said that was a balanced budget, but they couldn't meet it.

My colleague here is an ex-banker. I can imagine what he would say if somebody came in to him with a business plan and said: "I have a business plan here that looks really great, but when you get to page 95 of the business plan, you see that we really, really can't make it." I just wonder whether he would loan them money. No wonder our debt rating was reduced under the NDP government — twice. So that was where we were.

In 2001 we embarked on a program. Again, we had a vision. We knew what we wanted to do. We had, again, our *New Era* document, which laid out how we were going to achieve these goals. We had three overarching goals. The first one was to restore sound fiscal management, the second one was to revitalize the economy, and the third one said we would do that while, at the same time, protecting health care and education.

I'd like to talk about restoring sound fiscal management, because we did a number of steps there that have never been done before. Again, my colleague from Victoria-Beacon Hill will love this, because I'm going to talk about the fact that every ministry had to come up with three-year service plans. Now, what does that mean? It means that they had to look into the

future. What happened with the previous budget was.... They could do one budget — one-off at a time. In the previous budget they said, "It's balanced," but they deferred all the heavy lifting until the next period.

When we took over government, we hired a group of people to go through the accounts to see where we were, because to benchmark, you have to know where your starting point is. They said: "If you keep everything the same and just manage the government the way things are going right now, you're going to experience a \$3.8 billion deficit. If you do nothing, it will be a \$3.8 billion structural deficit."

That happened because the previous government didn't have to do a three-year plan. They could tout their plan and say how great they were because they just had to do one. But when you have to lay it out for three years, you can't defer things.

Interjection.

B. Kerr: Yeah, it's called planning.

The other thing we did is adopt generally accepted accounting principles. In other words, the entire government organization was going to be in one accounting umbrella so there can't be any chicanery in the books. There can't be any offloading, because it's all going to be included. So that's another fiscal management tool so that people can really see what's in public accounts and know that what they see is what is there.

In addition to the three-year service plans that every ministry had to keep, they had to set performance measurement criteria. In other words, they had to say: "This is where we want to be. This is how many miles of road we're going to pave. This is how many potholes we're going to fill." They had to set up this performance measurement criteria so that we could measure results, because it doesn't matter how much money you spend if you don't get the results you want.

Proper sound fiscal management is saying: "Where do we want to go? How are we going to get there?" and "Let's measure ourselves along the way." That's exactly what we did, and that hasn't been done before.

[1730]

What does that do for the opposition? That gives them all kinds of ammunition now. They can nitpick away at one thing or another and say: "Hey, you missed that target here," or "You missed that target there." They can do that. They've never been able to do that before. No government has been able to do that before because no government has set targets other than ourselves.

The other thing we've done is.... What we're talking about here is a fixed election date. Well, that may not sound important, but when you have a fixed election date, you can plan your legislative agenda. There are staff that work here in the legislative offices who can now plan their holidays with their families. We can plan our holidays with our families, which helps younger members that are in the House. Fixed election

dates, I think, are really important. A fixed House agenda is really important. Again, that's part of sound fiscal management.

We also did something else that hasn't been done before. It's something that I'm proud the Premier did and that I'm sure my colleagues on the back bench are proud we did. We were given the right to vote on any bill the way we wanted. In other words, free votes in the House for private members, or backbenchers as some people call them.

That has made us accountable. Knowing that we're accountable, we can't slough it off and say we were forced to vote that way. We have to ensure that we know what we're voting for. We hold our own government to account. We know that if we're going to vote in favour of the government's bill, we have a reason for doing it, because now any one of our constituents can hold us to account on our votes. I'm proud that in 99 percent of the cases, I voted in favour of the government, because I thought we were doing the right thing. I'm proud of that.

We also set up caucus committees. These committees were to take the information to the ministers. We would have to sit around, and the minister would say: "This is the bill that I want to present." As private members, we would hear from our constituents. We could take that to the minister, and we could sit down and say: "Well, you know, you might not have thought about this. This is a pretty important issue. It's an important issue for my constituency, but I think overall it's an important issue." Then the minister could adjust the bill accordingly.

By the time it came to the House, it was a well-thought-out bill that had input from every part and everybody in British Columbia. I think that was an important thing that we did and part of sound fiscal management.

We also set up the standing committees. We actually brought the standing committees and put them to work to go out to the province and listen to the people.

We brought all these measures in. I'm sure there are a lot more, but I'm speaking from the top of my head, and I'll remember a lot more when I sit down. We brought these measures in because we knew that unless we brought in some semblance of sound fiscal management, we couldn't meet our goal, which is the next one: revitalizing the economy. You can't have a good, strong set of social programs without a strong economy. They go hand in glove, so we set out, then, to revitalize the economy.

My colleague brought up the grocery store business. I brought this up some time ago, and I'll bring it up again, because I like the grocery business. I used to be a grocer. If I were to walk into grocery store that I was taking over and it was poorly managed and was losing money, I wouldn't go down to my dairy department and say: "Oh my God. We're getting \$4 for a jug of milk right now. If we raise the price up to \$6, that will give us enough money to pay our expenses, and everything will be fine." If we did that, we all know what would happen. The customers would

leave. They'd go across the way to the store of our competitor, and we'd be in an even worse situation.

Well, that's what was happening. We were in a situation where we had a high tax regime and the people in Alberta had a lower tax regime. What was happening? There was an out-migration from British Columbia to Alberta.

R. Hawes: They were buying their milk in Alberta.

B. Kerr: They were buying their milk in Alberta. So what do we do? What would I do in my grocery business? I'd say: "You know, I know it's going to hurt up-front. I know it's going to be a problem. It's going to create a bit of a hole for me, but I'm going to reduce my milk down to \$2.99 a jug."

What will happen then? People will come back. Once I have people coming back into my store, I can fine-tune the other aspects of my store and keep people there.

That's what we did. We had significant tax reductions, which is what we promised to do and what we did. What are the results? Have there been results to this? You bet there have been results for the initiatives that we've taken. By reducing the regulatory burden, by reducing the taxation, by being business-friendly, by doing all these things, we attracted investment back to British Columbia.

[1735]

You have to connect the dots. What happens with investment is that investment comes into the province. Then employment comes into the province, because investment means employment. Then people come back to the province. Then the tax base goes up. Then we can provide more social services for the people that need it, but then not as many people would need the social services because they're now working. Just connect the dots, but I don't know that that's been done before.

Let's just talk about that. One of the best social programs we can offer the people is a job. So what have we done? We've created 200,000 new jobs. That's 200,000 new social programs for people in the workforce feeling good about themselves, providing for their families. But you know, the NDP don't like that. I contend now that NDP probably stands for "need dependent people," because everything they did put people in dependency on the government.

I'm proud of what we did. We have done the right things. We've charted a course. We've changed the government around to create sound fiscal management programs. We've revitalized the economy. We've protected health care and education. We set a course for the future — a vision for our children, a vision for our grandchildren — and I'm proud of the future. I'm looking forward to living in British Columbia, and I'm looking forward to the fact that maybe one day my grandchild will be in here doing the same thing I'm doing. It's because of the vision that we have now to take British Columbia forward. Thank you very much for giving me this time.

J. Bray: It's a pleasure to follow the member from Malahat-Juan de Fuca. Sometimes we don't see chartered accountants getting quite so animated, so it's very refreshing to see how passionate he is for his community and for the province and how much he's doing to highlight the fact that we are bringing in good management to this province.

You know, when I did my reply to the throne speech, I was able to spend a significant portion of time talking about a positive vision, talking about the direction in which we want to take this province, talking about the future we want to provide for our children and our grandchildren. It was just so thrilling for me to be able to spend that amount of time talking about positive things.

Unfortunately, we had the opposition spending their time being negative, deconstructive — not offering anything to debate, not offering any of their own vision, any of their own plan. Now that we've had perhaps the most positive budget in the history of this province, laid down by our Minister of Finance, I didn't expect that the NDP would change tack. Certainly, the comments of the opposition have proven me right — that they are, indeed, going to be negative.

It's instructive to listen to the opposition. I hope they're going to take notes over there about some of this. Their lines aren't just redundant; they also have a ring of familiarity, Mr. Speaker, which perhaps you might find interesting.

The Leader of the Opposition, the House Leader, spent time talking about deathbed repentances, which I thought was a slightly catchy phrase, if inaccurate, until I had a look at *Hansard*. This might sound similar to the Leader of the Opposition's debates a couple of days ago: "It represents a deathbed repentance that will fool nobody. British Columbians no longer trust this...government." Now, that's exactly what the Leader of the Opposition was saying in her unscripted comments. The quote I had was from somebody named Glen Clark, from 1991.

"It is clear that now, on the eve of a general election, they're saying: 'We won't do it anymore.' Given the long-standing failure of this government to tell the truth, to distinguish between right and wrong, does anyone really believe that this promise will last more than two or three weeks of the election campaign?" Was that the Leader of the Opposition, the member for Vancouver-Hastings? That was Glen Clark in 1991.

All they're doing is resorting to their speeches and their tactics from the eve of their decade of decline. When they actually try to debate anything about the budget, their credibility really starts to take a stretch.

Here's what one of their cabinet ministers said about budgets: "Where we should be putting our energy is not into balanced-budget legislation — which, frankly, is a crock...." That was Gordon Wilson in 1996. "Balanced-budget legislation is just a crock. It's nonsense, because you cannot accurately and adequately project to the dollar in any given year what government revenues are going to be" — Gordon Wilson, 1996.

[1740]

Here's an interesting comment that I found somewhat telling about the NDP's philosophy: "Even to suggest putting balanced-budget legislation before the people is a shame. That is a true shame. Especially at a time of economic downturn, putting forward balanced-budget legislation suggestions is not only shameful; it is disgraceful." That was from 1999, from Erda Walsh, who I understand is seeking re-election for the same party. Same old story. I'm quite sure that she is telling Carole James right now to instruct her members to vote against our balanced budget.

The trail continues on. How about this? "It says yes to tax cuts and no to megaprojects; it signals to business the new government's readiness to help them succeed" — Paul Ramsey, Minister of Finance, the year of 2000. Here he is actually saying that tax cuts work, but the leader of the opposition, Carole James, says no to tax cuts.

What will the opposition MLAs do now? Their leader says one thing. Their policy guru, who's writing their campaign platform — or supposed campaign platform — seems to believe something else. It really puts them in a difficult position.

The person who is writing their platform right now, Paul Ramsey, when asked about the 2001 pension accounting change that allowed them to have an actuarially balanced budget: "It's an accounting change. There is no cash." Whenever the Leader of the Opposition talks about that balanced budget, she just has to look to her former colleague Paul Ramsey, who admitted in this House that it actually is not about the cash. There is no cash. It won't buy one hospital bed. It won't buy one hip replacement. It won't fund one seat in post-secondary education. Their balanced budget was on an accounting change.

"The Liberals say the role of government is to develop a climate for investment and step back. Nonsense." That was Paul Ramsey in 1993. He actually believes, as their policy guru, that government's role is not to create a climate for investment.

Well, what does he believe government's role is? What is his vision? What is the vision that Jim Sinclair and Carole James are working on right now? What is their secret agenda? Why won't the members of the opposition even articulate in the slightest terms what their vision is?

You know, I find it hard when the opposition stands up and says all we do is break our promises. I find that insulting but also completely false.

I actually did a little research. I took a look at our campaign platform of 2001. I would like the opposition to have a look at this, because that's actually what a campaign platform looks like. It has the vision and the goals that you set out, that you put before the people of British Columbia, and it has the strategies and objectives for how you achieve that.

Now, the opposition stands there and says that we break promises. Let's talk about that. Let's talk about what we specifically said we were going to do — the specific promises.

Introduce a dramatic tax cut in personal income taxes. We did that. Pass real balanced-budget legislation. We did that. Pass real truth-in-budgeting legislation. We did that. The auditor general even says that we have the best accounting and budget process in Canada.

Restore education as an essential service under the Labour Code. We did that. Pass merit employment legislation. We did that. Establish a waste-buster website. We did that. Restore workers' democratic right to a secret ballot vote on certification under the Labour Code and ensure that the same rules apply for certification as for decertification. We did that. Restore all workers' rights to negotiate contracts by outlawing sectoral bargaining. We did that.

Restore open tendering on government contracts. We did that. Appoint an independent task force to review the options, models and costs, and effectiveness of private sector pay-equity legislation. We did that. Eliminate the HCL union-only hiring hall requirements on highway construction projects and government-sponsored silviculture contracts. We did that.

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Eliminate government subsidies to business that give some companies an unfair advantage over other competitors. We did that. Certainly, the opposition isn't touting their handling of Skeena Cellulose, I'm sure.

Pass a community charter. We did that. Appoint an independent inquiry on B.C. Ferries. We did that. Ensure Crown corporations are subject to local zoning and land use bylaws. We did that. Scrap photo radar. We did that.

Establish a fixed provincial election date. We did that. Establish a fixed date for tabling provincial budget and set legislative calendar. We did that. Establish a new Premier's council on technology. We did that.

Repeal the NDP's fixed-wage legislation. We did that. Restore workers' rights to their pensions by repealing the laws that allow some pension plans to suspend pension benefits for early retirees who choose to continue working in their previous field of employment. We did that.

We said we would do all of those specific commitments on page 4 of the *New Era* document within 90 days, and we did them within 90 days. I don't actually hear any heckling from the opposition, so I guess they have to grudgingly acknowledge that we accomplished everything on page 4.

Let's have a look at what else we said we would do. We said we would honestly balance the budget without cutting funding for health care or education. We've balanced the budget two years in a row. In every year of our government we've increased spending in health care and increased spending in education.

Increase funding for the auditor general's office. Despite what the Leader of the Opposition always decries, when we were elected, in our first year we increased the budget of the auditor general.

Eliminate the use of special warrants to prevent government from spending your money without prior

legislative approval. The NDP were famous for that. They'd show up here after exhausting the contingency fund and actually just do special warrants to spend hundreds of millions of dollars of extra money without any scrutiny. They talk about debate. Special warrants are the cheapest use of government power there is. They became masters at it.

Establish service plans that include measurable performance standards and targets for all programs that are annually audited and published for all taxpayers to see. Now, that is a significant change in the way government operates. I actually spent 13 years in the public service as a proud public servant prior to my election. I remember the policy-by-panic and the policy-by-press-release that the NDP used to operate by continually and the disarray that would cause to public servants at the field level, trying to deliver services to the public, and at the policy level, trying to figure out what on earth it was that the rotating group of ministers wanted done.

Require Crown corporations to be directly accountable to a committee of the Legislature. Modernize the Residential Tenancy Act. We did that. Restore an independent B.C. Utilities Commission to re-regulate B.C. Hydro's electric rates. We said we were going to do that in 2001, and we did that. Pass a community charter. We did that.

Protect B.C. Hydro and all of its core assets, including dams, reservoirs and power lines, under public ownership. That is exactly what we said on page 9 of our *New Era* document. Guess what. That is exactly what we've done. Not only that, but we've enhanced its ability to purchase green power, we've enhanced its opportunity to be in public scrutiny, and we've improved its performance.

Designate B.C. ferry routes as an essential service. We did that.

Implement a flexible, innovative program to increase the supply of affordable housing. We are the most dynamic and strongly supportive government in Canada for subsidized housing. Now we've brought in Independent Living B.C., which provides alternative levels of housing for seniors. We have supportive housing for those with mental health issues, and we have family social housing. We've spent more in this budget on social housing than ever before in the history of this province.

The NDP made commitments on paper that they admitted.... Corky Evans admitted: "We made announcements that we had no intention of carrying out." This government makes commitments, they put them in the budget, and they implement them.

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Focus resources on improving northern and rural transportation. The NDP abandoned rural British Columbia — abandoned it. It was shocking, the disregard the NDP paid to rural B.C. Depopulation, the death of small towns, especially on the coast, and the absolute ignoring of the problem by the members opposite.... We said we were going to do that. We're spending \$600 million for rehabilitation of rural roads, for extending

drilling seasons in the spring in the northeast and for additional roadwork to actually enhance transportation in the north.

We said on page 10: "Cut the red tape and regulatory burden by one-third within three years." We did that and we surpassed that.

Increase access to Crown lands and resources to create jobs in tourism, mining, forestry, farming, ranching, and oil and gas. Guess what. Forestry is growing. Mining — fourfold growth in the last year on exploration. Oil and gas in the Peace River. Statistics Canada won't even report figures for unemployment in the northeast sector because the numbers are too low to be reliable. They literally have no unemployment in the oil and gas sector.

Phase out taxes on investment and productivity to stimulate economic growth and job creation. We eliminated the corporate capital tax. We reduced business taxes. This budget raises the threshold for small business exemption by another \$100,000 to \$400,000. Now, this is an important point, because we were specific in our strategy around energizing business, right on page 10.

I actually think I know why the NDP are having so much trouble with this budget and why this budget has caught them off guard. It's because Carole James's secret plan is to go after business. You remember last year, Mr. Speaker, that the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives — the NDP's think tank — actually proposed a budget that included a 70 percent increase in taxes to business. When we raise the threshold for small business, when we have done what we've done to stimulate job growth....

The reason why Carole James and the NDP won't talk about their plan is because Carole James, Paul Ramsey and Jim Sinclair have already decided that they're going right after small business. They're going right after those young families starting out, those entrepreneurs who put their houses at risk. They mortgage themselves. They work as hard as they can — 70, 80, 90 hours a week — to create a business for themselves and employment for their neighbours and to participate in and support their community. The NDP are going right after them. I think that that's what British Columbians are starting to recognize.

Stimulate tourism with a plan to improve operators' abilities to successfully compete for visitors from around the world. This budget doubles the marketing budget for Tourism British Columbia. We said we would do it, and we did it.

Aggressively support and champion British Columbia's bid to host the 2010 Winter Olympics. That was another commitment — one of the 201. Clearly, we've succeeded in that.

Eliminate the backlog in delays in Crown land applications which have cost over \$1 billion and 20,000 lost jobs. When we took office, there was a two-year delay in Land and Water B.C. for access to tenures and leases for Crown land. Through the great work of the Minister of Sustainable Resource Management and the great work of our public servants and the clear direction and support from government, two years ago we

eliminated the backlog. Now, for requests large and small, we deliver an answer to a prospective developer or investor in 120 days. That's delivering good government. That's delivering good services. That's what we said we'd do on page 10. That's exactly what we've done.

I have a lot more to say on our positive budget and refuting the ridiculously redundant lines of the opposition, but noting the time, I move adjournment of debate.

J. Bray moved adjournment of debate.

Motion approved.

Hon. G. Plant moved adjournment of the House.

Motion approved.

Deputy Speaker: The House stands adjourned until 10 o'clock on Monday.

The House adjourned at 5:55 p.m.