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Speaker: Honourable Wade Verge, MHA

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The House met at 2:00 p.m.

MR. SPEAKER (Verge): Order, please!

I think I neglected to say admit strangers, but I see some people did get in.

Statements by Members

MR. SPEAKER: Today we have members' statements from Members for the District of Humber Valley, Virginia Waters, St. Barbe, the District of Port au Port, Trinity – Bay de Verde, and the District of Bonavista North.

The hon. the Member for the District of Humber Valley.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. BALL: Mr. Speaker, thank you.

I rise in this hon. House today to pay tribute to a community leader and a new friend, Wanda Baker-Foster. Wanda spent her life dedicated to many worthwhile causes within Deer Lake and across the Province.

Wanda embodied the definition of a true volunteer and community builder. She also maintained a successful career while caring for her family, as a dedicated wife, the mother of two beautiful children and a wonderful daughter.

Wanda was an inspiration dedicating her time to a number of community groups including Deer Lake Minor Hockey, Children's Wish Foundation, The Rotary Club, and the Silver Blades Figure Skating Club.

In January, Wanda lost her life in a battle with cancer at the age of forty-four. She leaves behind her husband, Terry, and two children, Michaela and Markus.

Mr. Speaker, I ask all hon. members to join me in paying tribute to an inspirational woman, dedicated wife, mother, daughter, and a dear friend, Wanda Baker-Foster.

Thank you.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Member for the District of Virginia Waters.

MS C. BENNETT: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

It is exciting when you hear about a group of young students coming together and using their talents to help other children. Today I rise in this hon. House to recognize the students of Ms Alison Hammond's Grade 6 class at Mary Queen of Peace.

This group of talented students came up with the idea of a knitting fundraiser to support the children at the Janeway Hospital. Led by their teacher, the young artisans came up with a variety of items they could create and sell as part of their fundraising goal – scarves, headbands, hats, and of course, the ever-popular friendship bracelets. The ideas were endless.

They set a bold target of raising \$300. Production began and included many after school knitting sessions. Finally, on the day of the fundraiser, the lineups for the students' creations started before they were even ready to sell.

Before they knew it they had quadrupled their target, raising \$1,200.

Children helping children – is there anything more innocent and inspirational.

I ask all hon. members to join me in thanking these students whose selfless creativity and generosity demonstrate the true meaning of kindness.

Congratulations students, and keep knitting.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Member for the District of St. Barbe.

MR. J. BENNETT: Mr. Speaker, I rise in this hon. House to congratulate Todd Wight, co-owner and general manager of Ocean View Motel, Rocky Harbour, on becoming Newfoundland and Labrador's first Certified Hotel General Manager. Todd was officially presented with his certification at Hospitality Newfoundland and Labrador's Annual

Conference and Trade Show in Gander, February 24-26, 2015.

Todd has been co-owner and general manager of the Ocean View Hotel in Rocky Harbour, Gros Morne National Park, since 2007. He has twenty years of experience in the tourism industry, including seven years in the hotel industry, and previous positions with Hospitality Newfoundland and Labrador, Gros Morne Gatherings, and the Newfoundland and Labrador Outfitters Association.

Todd is also an active volunteer on a number of Newfoundland and Labrador tourism industry boards, including Gros Morne Gatherings, and Western Newfoundland and Labrador Destination Management Organization. He also occupies a Hospitality Newfoundland and Labrador representative seat on the Newfoundland and Labrador Tourism Board.

Todd has experienced success implementing his motto, "Hire for Attitude, Train for Skill."

Mr. Speaker, I ask all members of the House to join me in congratulating Todd Wight on becoming Newfoundland and Labrador's first Certified Hotel General Manager.

Thank you.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Member for the District of Port au Port.

MR. CORNETT: I rise to congratulate the winners and nominees who were honoured at the Stephen Awards Banquet held in Stephenville on April 19 as part of Volunteer Week 2015.

Neil Drew was honoured with the Citizen of the Year Award while Hannah Blundon was the recipient of the Youth of the Year Award, both being recognized for their invaluable volunteer service to the community. Jesse Byrne won the Junior Male Athlete of the Year Award; Katara White was presented with the Junior Female Athlete of the Year Award; and Chris Dugas was presented with the Senior Athlete of the Year Award, for the third time.

Also, eighteen Certificates of Merit for Outstanding Volunteer Work were presented. Congratulations are extended to: Denise Alexander, Marie Alexander, Millie Byrne, Barbara Chipp, the Late Barry Coates, Joannie Coffin, Gary Coffin, Norma Childs, Wanda Conran, Evelyn Davis, Don Dunphy, Charles Earle, Reg Eddy, Collin Giles, Paul Grenier, June Kelly, Tony Menchenton, Cody O'Quinn, and Dorothy (Dot) Pike.

Mr. Speaker, I ask all hon. members to join with me in congratulating all the winners and all of the nominees of the Stephen Awards on their invaluable contributions to our communities, our region, and indeed, our Province.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Member for the District of Trinity – Bay de Verde.

MR. CROCKER: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, I rise in this hon. House today to recognize all those involved in Baccalieu Idol, a musical competition at Baccalieu Collegiate in Old Perlican.

Baccalieu Collegiate has an outstanding and award-winning music program. This competition was started to give students an opportunity to showcase their musical talents. The first Baccalieu Idol show was in 2003. The show was a success and since has become an annual event. Several of the school's former idols have gone on to record CDs and some are members of bands today that are currently travelling our Province.

On March 21, Baccalieu Collegiate hosted the All Star Baccalieu Idol Reunion. This concert was a fundraiser with all benefits going towards the school's music program. These past and current students were delighted to give back to the music program that initially gave them so much. It was a tremendous success raising over \$3,400.

I ask all hon. members to join me in congratulating all of those who organized and participated in the Baccalieu Idol Reunion Concert.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Member for the District of Bonavista North.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. CROSS: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I am proud to rise today to recognize the Building Bridges Youth Theatre comprised of students of Pearson Academy and some recent alumni.

Last summer, a group of thirteen students from Grades 4-12 answered the call to spend their entire summer holidays as members casting a play *I Minds A Time*, which would be the focus of the Barbour Living Heritage Village performances at the Neptune 2 Theatre.

The locally-scripted play portrayed the settling of Newfoundland and Labrador, our history and our culture through the eyes of Skipper Eli and Aunt Sophie via drama, vignettes, and song. The stage production started slowly but ended up being in great demand as sold-out shows were the norm through the month of August.

The troupe has grown this year to approximately three dozen eager youth, who write and deliver four different performances, with the highlight being *Random Passage: The Settling of Cape Island* as a local adaption of Bernice Morgan's novel, set for where it was written, Cape Island. We call it the true *Random Passage*. There are youth actors, singers, and writers very eager to entertain locals and visitors alike at the Barbour Village through the 2015 season.

I invite all of us to visit a performance of the Building Bridges Youth Theatre this August and you will not be disappointed.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. SPEAKER: Statements by Ministers.

Statements by Ministers

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Premier.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

PREMIER DAVIS: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I am pleased to rise in this hon. House to inform members about the Climate Change Summit that I attended last week.

On April 14, the Province of Quebec hosted a Climate Change Summit in Quebec City to which all Premiers and territorial leaders were invited. The purpose of the event was to share experience on efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and adapt to the impacts of climate change, while exploring the scope for further collaboration. The summit provided an important opportunity to discuss climate change in the run up to the United Nations conference in Paris in December where a new international climate change agreement is due to be considered.

Mr. Speaker, the thing that struck me about this summit was the degree of consensus among the jurisdictions present. Everyone agreed that climate change is a serious challenge and that all provinces and territories have both the power and responsibility to take action. There was consensus on the importance of improving resilience to those climate change impacts that are now inevitable and also an understanding amongst leaders that transitioning to a lower carbon economy is not only important, but it is necessary.

The scale of the climate change challenge is considerable and it sometimes locks people into thinking about climate change in terms of the risk it poses. However, a clear message from the summit was that great challenges also bring great opportunities. Leaders spoke extensively about the economic opportunities that early action to tackle climate change can generate.

Mr. Speaker, I was delighted to represent Newfoundland and Labrador at this important event and confirm our Province's ongoing commitment to action. For example, we have committed over \$24 million through the Green Fund to support greenhouse gas reduction

projects for businesses and communities. We have also improved the energy efficiency of over 5,500 low income homes through our Residential Energy Efficiency Program, saving householders an average of \$720 on their annual energy costs. In addition, we have worked with the iron ore mining, offshore petroleum, and refining industries to identify how greenhouse gas emissions can be reduced at their facilities and have recently completed consultations with large industry to inform the development of a legislative framework.

Mr. Speaker, good work has been done, but we know that more will be needed if we are to meet the greenhouse gas reduction targets in 2020 and 2050. We are committed to do this and look forward to continuing our work with other provinces and territories, the federal government, external stakeholders, and members of this House as we move forward. I also look forward to further discussions with other premiers on climate change when I host the Council of Federation here in Newfoundland and Labrador in July of this year.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Leader of the Official Opposition.

MR. BALL: First of all, thank you.

I want to thank the Premier for the advance copy of his statement. Of course, the environment is of primary importance to all of us in this Province. Clean water, clear air, and a pristine landscape, this is what we offer to the world when we invite people to come to visit, but more importantly we invite them to come and live.

Protecting our environment must always be a primary duty for any government. Interesting to note – it is not mentioned in this statement today – is that today is Earth Day, a day for all of us to recognize the value of our little part of the planet. Started in 1970, Earth Day has grown to become a world-wide event celebrating a clean and healthy environment. While we celebrate Earth Day, I think it is fair to say that our environment has never been more challenged than it is today. Scientists from all around the

world are reminding us that we need to address this problem.

Dr. David Barber of the University of Manitoba tells us that the Arctic ice is melting at an alarming rate. In the last thirty years, the melt is equivalent to the amount of water in Lake Superior. This is happening at a time when we are starting to emerge as Canada's gateway to the North.

So climate change is a challenge, yet there are opportunities. Developing new technologies, opening up opportunities for new business models, and changing the way we run older industries will all be required in the future.

The 2007 Energy Plan made many promises that this government has yet to keep. This is not a matter of saying we should do more. Mr. Speaker, we must do more.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Member for St. John's East.

MR. MURPHY: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I thank the Premier for the advance copy of his statement here today.

While the provincial government has been doing some good work around climate change, what is even more remarkable than that, not one mention of climate change was made in yesterday's federal budget. Climate change means more extreme weather events that can be particularly costly to this Province, Mr. Speaker. More money is needed, for example, by municipalities for everything from larger culverts to emergency response.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Oh, oh!

MR. SPEAKER: Order, please!

MR. MURPHY: It is going to cost this Province if we do not deal with it. I agree with the Premier that work needs to continue, but shame on the federal government for backing away from any federal commitment to this Province.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Oh, oh!

MR. SPEAKER: Order, please!

The hon. the Minister of Health and Community Services.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. KENT: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

It is hard to follow that, but I will try.

I rise in this hon. House today to recognize National Organ and Tissue Donation Awareness Week, which is taking place from April 19 to April 25. This week provides an important opportunity to highlight an issue that impacts thousands of Canadians each year.

Whether it is a friend, family member, or loved one who is affected, the need for organ and tissue donation will touch many of us in this Province throughout our lives. As our population ages the need for donations is increasing as well.

Health Canada records indicate that approximately 4,500 Canadians wait for organ transplants each year. Unfortunately, the reality is that over 200 of these individuals will die while waiting for a transplant. Despite Canada having some of the most advanced transplant technologies, some of the most highly skilled surgeons, and some of the best equipped transplant hospitals, with only a fraction of Canadians registered to donate, our donation rates remain lower than many countries in the world.

Mr. Speaker, I believe we can do better.

The Government of Newfoundland and Labrador is a strong supporter of organ and tissue donation and transplantation. Becoming an organ donor only takes a few minutes, but by doing so we can potentially have a positive impact on the lives of up to seventy-five people. In fact, we may be saving the lives of up to eight other individuals when we become organ donors.

Mr. Speaker, I encourage everyone in Newfoundland and Labrador to indicate their desire to become an organ donor on their drivers licence applications or renewals. For more information about organ and tissue donation and to receive a donor card residents are encouraged to visit EasternHealth.ca/Give or call toll-free at 1-877-640-1110. The decision to become an organ donor can mean giving the gift of life – the most precious gift you can offer.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Member for Burgeo – La Poile.

MR. A. PARSONS: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I thank the minister for the advance copy of his statement.

Raising awareness of organ and tissue donations is important because of the impact that it can have on people waiting for transplants. For many, transplants mean a new beginning. As the minister just said, up to eight lives can be positively affected by a single donor. You can give so much by just saying you will donate.

The minister also references that we have lower donation rates than many areas. Right now in this Province, you have to opt in to be an organ and tissue donor. We should continue to bring awareness to organ and tissue donation; but, in addition, maybe it is time we had the conversation of opting out of organ donation, also referred to as presumed consent, instead of waiting for people to opt in to be a donor.

A 2009 report showed there was 25 per cent increase in organ donations when there was presumed consent. Clearly, there will be some legal, some philosophical conversations; however, this is a conversation that needs to happen. I reference Austria where they do have opt out and 99.98 per cent consent.

I encourage government to start the conversation; the potential is there to positively affect many lives because of it.

Thank you.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Member for Signal Hill – Quidi Vidi.

MS MICHAEL: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

I, too, thank the minister for the advance copy of his statement. This awareness week is extremely important to promote. Organ donation can extend people's lives. A recent poll found that while 91 per cent of respondents supported the idea of organ and tissue donation, only 44 per cent had made the decision to donate.

This week the Canadian Blood Services and organ donation organizations across the country are holding a drive to register 48,000 new donors in forty-eight hours. I encourage government to do everything possible to encourage more people to check the box on their driver's licence application or renewal and share their wishes with their families.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Minister of Transportation and Works.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. BRAZIL: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I am pleased to rise today to talk about engaging with our partners, enforcement agencies, and stakeholders in industry on the importance of prioritizing road safety.

Provincial roads and highways are used by our residents and visitors alike. Whether travelling or working on these roads, personal safety is critically important, and each of us has a responsibility to help ensure everyone's safety needs are met.

With this in mind, the Department of Transportation and Works held the first Road Safety Roundtable in the fall of 2013. A second roundtable was held in the fall of 2014, and it is anticipated that a third will take place this fall.

The purpose of the roundtables is to encourage dialogue between stakeholders on how we can make our provincial roads a safer place for all.

The roundtables include presentations by stakeholders and discussions based on three pillars to creating a safe highway system: engineering, education, and enforcement. A broad range of topics has been discussed, for example: traffic control; site control; engineering solutions that enhance safe work practices during road maintenance and construction; communications between stakeholders; and development of methods of educating drivers about safe driving practices in and around construction sites.

The roundtables have been the impetus for the initiation of a safety awareness program which includes a media campaign sponsored by Workplace Health, Safety and Compensation Commission, the Newfoundland and Labrador Construction Safety Association, law enforcement agencies, and the government.

Past attendees at the roundtable include representatives from Transportation and Works, Motor Vehicle Registration of Service NL, the Heavy Civil Association, Occupational Health and Safety, the Construction Safety Association, NAPE, Royal Newfoundland Constabulary, Royal Canadian Mounted Police, and Workplace Health, Safety and Compensation Commission of Newfoundland and Labrador. I would like to thank all of those who have attended and hope you will continue to participate in next year's roundtable. Their contributions are valuable and critical to the process of ensuring safety is prioritized and upheld.

I encourage all hon. members and motorists to always consider how each of us can create a culture of road safety in Newfoundland and Labrador.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Member for St. John's South.

MR. OSBORNE: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I thank the minister for an advance copy of his statement. When I got it, I could not help but wonder why something as important as a Ministerial Statement would talk about a roundtable on road safety that took place six months ago, or would announce a roundtable that is happening six months from now.

The reality is we all know the media stories that have been covered lately on road safety and the need for guardrails and issues around road safety. That is the reason for this statement: to give the impression that the minister is on top of things and there is really nothing to worry about.

Mr. Speaker, the biggest step to achieving road safety should be to have roads and highways that are safe; roads and highways that are free of ruts, holes, and other driving hazards; roads and highways that have adequate and safe guardrails.

Mr. Speaker, enforcement should also be another priority for government. When you look at the fact that the Auditor General in 2013 identified \$37.3 million that had accumulated in outstanding fines, road enforcement is not so prevalent an issue when people know that they do not have to pay the fines; they can get away with paying their fines.

I understand, Mr. Speaker, you are about to stand. My time is up.

Thank you.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Member for St. John's East.

MR. MURPHY: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I thank the minister for the advance copy of his statement here today. Mr. Speaker, while the minister mentions road safety, he does not mention the state of our highways, and they are in a state. They themselves, because of a lack of maintenance and years of neglect, are hazards in themselves, and that is part of the problem. This government knows that the real answer is to have a road maintenance program that does not involve politics.

What about hearing from members of the public at large, for example? He has talked about the other various interest groups. Besides talking about engineering enforcement and education, he should be talking about another very important element here too; it is about engagement with the general public. Ask them how they feel about their roads and listen to the answers they are giving you, and then act on it.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. SPEAKER: Order, please!

Further statements?

Oral Questions.

Oral Questions

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Leader of the Official Opposition.

MR. BALL: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Yesterday, government's nineteen-page Speech from the Throne only mentions the Province's fiscal situation just once. That is to say they plan to balance the books five years down the road – that is the next decade.

So, I ask the Premier: With seventeen consecutive months of year over year job losses in our Province, why wasn't the Province's fiscal situation a priority in this year's Throne Speech?

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Premier.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

PREMIER DAVIS: Mr. Speaker, I think it is fair to say that the Province's fiscal circumstances has probably been the topic discussed more by myself, the Minister of Finance, and members of our government more than any other topic in recent weeks and recent months. It is very clear to us how important the fiscal challenges are that we face. In fact, there are times I have risen here in this House when members opposite have mocked me for talking about the fiscal challenges that we face.

It is very clear to the people of the Province, it is very clear to the Members of the House of Assembly that we face a very, very difficult challenge, short-term challenge that is facing us as a Province, Mr. Speaker. It is not unique to us. It is the same type of challenge that is facing other provinces, other jurisdictions that are reliant on oil. We will announce our way of dealing with that, our plan for the future, when the Budget is brought down.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Leader of the Official Opposition.

MR. BALL: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Well, I say to the Premier, that it is really not mocking, it is a reality. When just a few months ago the numbers that were being predicted are quite different than what we have seen.

Mr. Speaker, the RCMP is currently investigating the shooting of Don Dunphy by an RNC officer. However, the RCMP were involved in the risk assessment before the RNC officer showed up at Mr. Dunphy's door on Easter Sunday.

I ask the Premier: Given that the RCMP were involved in this situation, do you think it is appropriate for them, the RCMP, to be completing this investigation?

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Premier.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

PREMIER DAVIS: Mr. Speaker, the events that have transpired are clearly tragic in so many ways and will have permanent impact on a very large number of people and a community. The circumstances that have taken place, they are no less than tragic. There is no other way to describe it, Mr. Speaker, than a significant tragedy that has taken place.

Mr. Speaker, the RCMP are the police with jurisdiction for the particular area where this matter transpired. As they took over the investigation, they had a number of options that were available to them. One of them was to assign an independent oversight to their

investigation. They have selected a retired Supreme Court Justice. I would suggest to members of this House, a well-respected retired Supreme Court Justice who has significant experience and background and has provided that person with unfettered access and oversight to the investigation. Mr. Speaker, we should allow the RCMP to do their investigation.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. SPEAKER: Order, please!

The hon. the Leader of the Official Opposition.

MR. BALL: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

We believe that all the details in this situation will likely not be known until there is an inquiry into what happened on the events of Easter Sunday. We believe it is appropriate for this inquiry to happen, to take place after the investigation is completed as well.

I ask the Premier: When can the family, and when can the people of Newfoundland and Labrador expect to see this investigation completed?

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Premier.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

PREMIER DAVIS: Mr. Speaker, I would expect, and I do expect, that the RCMP will conduct a comprehensive, a full, fair and frank investigation into the events that have taken place involving the tragic loss of life of Mr. Dunphy.

Mr. Speaker, I would not in any way put a timeline or a deadline, impose that upon the police to complete their investigation. There is no way for me to know when they are going to complete their investigation. I asked them to do a full, fair and frank investigation, complete their work in a comprehensive manner, Mr. Speaker, and I look forward to seeing what the results of that investigation are when they have completed their work.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Leader of the Official Opposition.

MR. BALL: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Government has announced that 427 pensioners have been overpaid by \$935,000. However, we have reason to believe there are much larger issues within oversight of payroll and benefits administration. There are significant gaps within the government system.

I ask the Premier: Are there any other issues that have not yet been disclosed with respect to payroll and benefits administration?

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Minister of Finance and President of Treasury Board.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. WISEMAN: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

We have throughout government many capable, competent public servants who do great work on behalf of the people of Newfoundland and Labrador, and no less can be said about the people who work with the Human Resource Secretariat, who provide supports for employees of the public service, who manage our pension plans and manage our payroll systems, and manage our benefits administration programs.

So, Mr. Speaker, periodically with administrative functions, whether it is in government or many organizations, periodically there will be errors that occur that will reflect – they will surface in audits, and that is why we do audits. That is why we have internal control mechanisms in place, and when those shortcomings are identified they are corrected.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Leader of the Official Opposition.

MR. BALL: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

In typical fashion from the Minister of Finance here, it was not about the people who do the great work within our public service. We on this side of the House believe that to be true.

What I asked the minister was: Are you aware of any other issues that you have not disclosed with respect to payroll and benefits administration? It is about: Are there things that have not been disclosed yet?

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Minister of Finance and President of Treasury Board.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. WISEMAN: Anytime in any of our systems, Mr. Speaker, whether it is payroll or benefits administration, anytime there is something that is found that has an impact on our employees, they will be notified. So I say, Mr. Speaker, the people who do the work that I just described a moment ago, would periodically run into a circumstance where they need to make contact with an employee and have a discussion with them about a change that may have to occur or something that has happened with respect to their benefits that they need to correct. Those things happen on a day-to-day basis in the administration of many plans, whether it is within government or large organizations anywhere.

So I say, Mr. Speaker, this is routine things that happen in benefit administration programs or payroll systems, and they are dealt with by the officials when they occur.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Leader of the Official Opposition.

MR. BALL: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Well, really to add some clarity around the question again because we have not heard what people want to hear.

Is it, yes or no? Are there any other issues that have not yet been disclosed with respect to payroll and benefits administration? It is really a yes or no answer.

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Minister of Finance and President of Treasury Board.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. WISEMAN: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Let me just say it one more time. The Leader of the Opposition would oversimplify something that is sometimes very in-depth and very important. So, simple yes and no answers are not always applicable.

Mr. Speaker, the administration of payroll systems, the administration of benefits like the people who work in the public service have, require complex structures. There are a lot of people doing the work on behalf of the employees of this Province.

I say, Mr. Speaker, let me repeat again, when something happens that impacts our employees, they are made aware of it. The people who work with our Human Resource Secretariat make that contact and make corrections if they are necessary.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Leader of the Official Opposition.

MR. BALL: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

We understand there are issues around insurance benefits, leave management, the implementation of a new human resource management system, so we have suggested and have asked that the Auditor General should be called in to investigate those concerns.

I ask the Premier: Will you ask the AG to do a thorough investigation into this matter?

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Minister of Finance and President of Treasury Board.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. WISEMAN: Extending invitations to the AG seems to be a pretty popular thing on behalf of members of the Opposition. Maybe they are not aware, Mr. Speaker, that the AG can come in any time. There is no restriction placed on the AG. If the AG has any reason to believe there is something that needs to be audited in any aspect of government's operations, he is free and anyone from his office is free to come in any time at all.

In fact, the AG does an annual review. The AG will select various departments that he may want to zero in on and do a complete audit. Members of the Public Accounts Committee – the Chair of that Committee, in fact, is a member of the Opposition – would very well be aware that the AG does audits all the time on various aspects of government's operations.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Leader of the Official Opposition.

MR. BALL: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Minister of Finance – we know the AG can go in there when he or she wants to. What I asked was – but it is not unusual for a minister or for the Premier to invite the AG, just like they did with the Humber Valley Paving contract. You can ask the AG to go in and do that. That was my question. I guess you are refusing to do that.

Government was forging ahead to collect this money from seniors, but we now understand that they have decided not to collect from survivors or those living in long-term care. We on this side of the House believe that government should not be going after seniors for this money.

I ask the Premier: What criteria are set for who pays and who does not pay?

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Minister of Finance and President of Treasury Board.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. WISEMAN: Mr. Speaker, the events that gave rise to the overpayment that the Leader of the Opposition is talking about were very unfortunate. Through no fault of their own, there are some 400 retired public servants who find themselves having been in receipt of an overpayment of their pension. We realize that this has had and will have a huge impact on many of their lives. That is a very unfortunate circumstance.

Mr. Speaker, to his question, what we are trying to do here is to (a) acknowledge that the overpayment needs to be – the new amount that

is required to be paid out needs to be adjusted and that has happened. In many cases these overpayments sometimes are substantial, sometimes they are small amounts. What we are trying to do is to make sure that any overpayment arrangement does not provide a hardship for those individuals.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Member for Virginia Waters.

MS C. BENNETT: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Four years ago, this government rolled out a new human resource management system called PeopleSoft. This system was intended to take care of such things as payroll and benefits data. Government spent over \$30 million on the project. Three different departments were involved: Finance, Human Resource Secretariat, and the chief information office. Today we know there are huge gaps in the infrastructure you guys implemented.

I ask the minister: Why didn't government provide the proper oversight to ensure that the \$30 million infrastructure investment was implemented correctly?

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Minister of Finance and President of Treasury Board.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. WISEMAN: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The member is correct. Government did implement a new human resource information system. The old one had been in place for many, many years. It was quite antiquated and, quite frankly, it was not supporting the people of the Province, it was not supporting the employees of the Province, and did not respond to the requirements of government. So, they implemented a new system, went to the market, invited proposals, did a short list, and selected a company to provide that new software system.

They engaged a consultant to help with the implementation process, while using the people that are in government. As with many complex systems when you are making a transition from

an old, antiquated system into a new system, there is going to be a time where there are implementation bugs to be worked out, and that is what we are working through, Mr. Speaker.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Member for Virginia Waters.

MS C. BENNETT: Mr. Speaker, this government spent over \$30 million on the new system. This government is unstable. About fifteen government ministers have been responsible for rolling out this new system.

I ask the minister responsible today: Will he be accountable to the people of the Province and explain how they spent over \$30 million and failed to deliver a reliable, accurate human resource management system?

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Minister of Finance and President of Treasury Board.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. WISEMAN: One of the things I can tell the member opposite, in anything that this Administration has done since we took power back in 2003 we will be not only accountable for, but we will stand and justify to the people of Newfoundland and Labrador everything that we have done, all of the actions we have taken, all of the money we have spent, all the new initiatives we have undertaken.

Yesterday, we heard in the Speech from the Throne highlighting some of the significant investments we made and we are accountable for those. We will answer to the people of the Province whether or not we spent them appropriately and whether or not they believe that they have good value for the investments this government has made over the last twelve years.

Any time we make a decision, Mr. Speaker, we will always be accountable for that decision.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Member for Cartwright – L'Anse au Clair.

MS DEMPSTER: Thank you.

Mr. Speaker, the Minister of Transportation and Works has now admitted that the 2016 start-up date for the new marine service in Labrador is not achievable. Nearly one year after the RFP closed, despite three delays and many assurances that the service would be in place in 2016, we now learn this is just not going to happen.

I ask the minister: It is time to be upfront with the people most affected by this service; what is the new start-up date?

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Minister of Transportation and Works.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. BRAZIL: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I want to make the hon. member opposite aware that my department, our Premier, and this Administration are committed to the people of Labrador as we are to the people in all of this Province, Mr. Speaker.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. BRAZIL: We engaged in an RFP process that was very engaging. It was very professionally-ran. We brought in a fairness monitor to assess exactly what was included in that to assure that the best return on our investment would be realized.

Mr. Speaker, we are facing a fiscal reality here. As part of that fiscal reality, we have gone back to the table to look at exactly what it is that best serves the people of Labrador. As we move that process forward, we will have a better time frame in the near future.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Member for Cartwright – L'Anse au Clair.

MS DEMPSTER: We listened to the Throne Speech yesterday talk about Labrador being a priority. It is not worth the paper it is written on. Now you cannot afford to give a boat – last, least, lowest again.

Mr. Speaker, the existing contract with the *Apollo* expires in 2016 in anticipation of the new service being available for that time. The minister has publically stated they will be offered an alternate solution.

I ask the minister again, since I got no answer to the first question: What contingency plan do you have in place to take the service beyond 2016?

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Minister of Transportation and Works.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. BRAZIL: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

As I mentioned earlier, we are committed to the people of Labrador and we are committed to improving the ferry service there. As we work towards that process, we are engaging the contracts. We have two great proponents in four contracts in Labrador that we work with. Our intention is to continue to work with those companies to ensure not only do we continue the service, but find ways to improve it as we move forward on the process of our RFP, Mr. Speaker.

I have only, as recently as an hour ago, had a meeting with the Nunatsiavut representatives and the First Minister Responsible for Transportation and had a very open discussion, in which we engaged about ways we can improve in Labrador. Mr. Speaker, I have met with councillors up there, I have met with mayors, I have had direct dialogue, I have had a lot of input, and we are going to continue to do that (inaudible) –

MR. SPEAKER: Order, please!

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Member for St. John's North.

MR. KIRBY: Mr. Speaker, in last year's Budget, this government committed to implementing full-day Kindergarten for 2016. Now, yesterday, in the Throne Speech, there was absolutely no mention of full-day Kindergarten. I ask the minister responsible: Was this on oversight on somebody's part, or are you still planning to implement full-day Kindergarten for 2016?

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Acting Minister of Education.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. DALLEY: Mr. Speaker, yesterday's Speech from the Throne referenced further commitment by our government to continue the work to improve education in this Province. We value education; it has always been a priority. Along the way, as we know, education is not static; it is continuous. We continue to look for ways to improve it. We have made commitments around full-day Kindergarten. Yesterday there was no reference of it, but there was no reference of a lot of things in the Speech yesterday with respect to –

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Oh, oh!

MR. SPEAKER: Order, please!

MR. DALLEY: No reference to a lot of things to do with education, Mr. Speaker, because there are so many aspects of education.

With respect to full-day Kindergarten, our government is committed to full-day Kindergarten. As the Budget rolls out in the days to come and we look at the enormous investment that this government is making in education, Mr. Speaker, we will certainly be able to give the answer to the member opposite.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. SPEAKER: Order, please!

The hon. the Member for St. John's North.

MR. KIRBY: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

In the 2014 Budget this government stated, and I will quote, that they would “begin the process to

implement a universal full-day Kindergarten program to enhance the early emotional, social and academic development of children.”

So I am not sure what the minister is saying. Are you still committed to implementing full-day Kindergarten in 2016 or are you not? Is that on the cutting table? Or are you still going to go ahead and implement your commitment for 2016 for full-day Kindergarten? Yes or no.

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Acting Minister of Education.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. DALLEY: Mr. Speaker, obviously I am new to the role as Acting Minister of Education, but I have watched the discussions back and forth in the House. Sometimes I understand the member opposite needs it to be clear.

Well, let me be clear; we are committed to full-day Kindergarten. We have said it. We said we are going to start the process, and we have started the process. I cannot get any more clearer than that, Mr. Speaker.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. SPEAKER: Order, please!

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Oh, oh!

MR. SPEAKER: Order, please!

The hon. the Member for The Straits – White Bay North.

MR. MITCHELMORE: Mr. Speaker, the new hunting and fishing guide announced fee hikes impacting tens of thousands of Newfoundlanders and Labradorians.

I ask the minister: Why increase these fees without consulting hunters and fishers before you pick their pockets?

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Minister of Environment and Conservation.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. CRUMMELL: Mr. Speaker, nobody likes it when fees are increased. There is nobody in this House who enjoys when fees are increased. There is nobody in this Province who is happy when fees increase. We are not happy that fees are increased as well.

Mr. Speaker, we did to go out and consult the people of the Province. We made them understand and they do understand the fiscal realities that we are living in today. We talked about fee increases. We talked about tax increases as a ways to deal with our budget situation.

We clearly heard that they want us to continue to look after the resources. They continue to want us to maintain the sustainability of the resources that are out there. Mr. Speaker, fee increases are part of paying for that. It will help our public Treasury as well.

MR. SPEAKER: Order, please!

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Member for The Straits – White Bay North.

MR. MITCHELMORE: It seems like the minister is quite happy to take money out of the pockets of everyday Newfoundlanders and Labradorians.

The outfitting industry which presells their hunting packages were not consulted before government slapped non-resident licences with a 50 per cent increase. Operators in rural Newfoundland and Labrador are having money snatched from their bottom lines that will impact the economy due to your government's lack of vision for small business.

I ask the minister: Since you failed to consultant the industry, will you release your review that justifies these attacks on small business and jobs in rural Newfoundland and Labrador?

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Minister of Environment and Conservation.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. CRUMMELL: Mr. Speaker, we consulted with the outfitting industry during our consultations for our moose management plan that we have moving forward.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Oh, oh!

MR. SPEAKER: Order, please!

MR. CRUMMELL: We have over 1,700 people participate in those consultations; 15 per cent of them were outfitters, according to our data. We talked about a variety of things. No, we did not talk directly about fee increases, Mr. Speaker, but we talked about the sustainability –

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Oh, oh!

MR. SPEAKER: Order, please!

MR. CRUMMELL: – of the resource, Mr. Speaker. We talked about what it is going to take to sustain the moose population, the caribou population, and the black bear population for outfitters and residents and non-residents going forward.

We spend millions of dollars a year making sure that these resources are sustainable, that we do the research and science behind that, and we think the outfitting industry, over time, can make this –

MR. SPEAKER: Order, please!

MR. CRUMMELL: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Member for Humber East.

MR. FLYNN: Outfitters have said that they were not consulted and the minister finally agreed, but the 50 per cent increase in big game licence has gone by without any consultation.

I am asking the Minister of Tourism: Did Environment and Conservation consult with you before arbitrarily raising these rates, or did he also leave you in the dark?

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Minister of Environment and Conservation.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. CRUMMELL: Mr. Speaker, I met with the outfitting association just last week. The Minister of Tourism met with them just a couple of months ago. The Minister of Tourism committed \$100,000 over three years to help sustain their industry organization. We are looking to provide some funding as well. They came to us and that was one of their asks. They had many asks that they put on the table.

Mr. Speaker, again, when it comes to the fees for outfitters, we looked at ways that we could have raised revenue for the Province, we looked at what the fees were for non-residents, we looked at other jurisdictions, and we decided to bring the fees up to where the levels are in other jurisdictions. So non-residents, coming to this Province, are now going to pay their fair share compared to what they pay in the rest of Canada, Mr. Speaker.

MR. SPEAKER: Order, please!

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Member for Humber East.

MR. FLYNN: Mr. Speaker, these small business owners stand to lose thousands of dollars – I spoke to one in excess of \$20,000 – because of the staggering increase in fees. Outfitters have sold packages in advance, signed binding contracts, with no way to recover the cost. They are requesting that you hold off on these increases for at least a year. We have to stop paying lip service to the tourism industry.

I ask the Tourism Minister: Will you demand the Environment Minister reverse this decision and lessen the negative impact on the tourism industry?

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Minister of Environment and Conservation.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. CRUMMELL: Mr. Speaker, when you look at the outfitting industry and the business model that they follow – I have been online. I had a look at how they charge their rates. Mr.

Speaker, some of the outfitters charge their fees, their rates, and then they have their licence fees separate from that. A lot of them do that. Everybody is going to be impacted.

Now, Mr. Speaker, when you look at a business model – and I was in business for twenty-five years – you look one, two, three years out. Costs can change. Insurance rates can go up. Cost of labour could go up. The price of gas could go up.

Mr. Speaker, if you take an average hunt, for a moose, for instance, it is about \$5,000 for four or five days hunting. If an outfitter decided to raise their rate 10 per cent for next year, he would pick up the lost money for this year. He would pick up more money for next year and out years. It would be very profitable for them.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. SPEAKER: Order, please!

The hon. the Member for Signal Hill – Quidi Vidi.

MS MICHAEL: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

Concerns have been raised about the protocol surrounding the decision for police to visit Donald Dunphy's home on Easter Sunday.

I ask the Premier: Will he commit to establishing an inquiry under the Public Inquiries Act to look into the protocol and events surrounding the shooting of Donald Dunphy?

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Premier.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

PREMIER DAVIS: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, as I had mentioned earlier, it is a tragic event that occurred involving the loss of life. Mr. Dunphy's loss of life is tragic in many, many ways.

Right now, there is a police investigation ongoing. The police investigation is also partnered and paired with an independent

oversight by a retired, respected Supreme Court Justice who has great experience and background in criminal procedures and criminal law.

I think it is appropriate before we reach any further decisions or attempt to make any further decisions that we wait for the outcome of the investigation, which I hope to be a comprehensive, full, fair, and frank investigation carried out by the RCMP.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Member for Signal Hill – Quidi Vidi.

MS MICHAEL: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I ask the Premier: Will he please tell this House who deployed the police officer to Donald Dunphy's house and why?

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Premier.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

PREMIER DAVIS: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, I think it would be very inappropriate to try and speculate and lead to what the outcomes of the investigation are going to be. I take it the RCMP are doing a full investigation of all of the circumstances surrounding the actions and what led up to the actions on that terrible and tragic day. I think it is just wrong for us to try and speculate or reach a conclusion, or discuss details of a matter that is still before police investigation.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Member for Signal Hill – Quidi Vidi.

MS MICHAEL: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I ask the Premier: Will he explain the chain of command between government, the Protective Services Unit, the RNC and the RCMP, and who gives instructions to the Protective Services Unit?

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Premier.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

PREMIER DAVIS: Mr. Speaker, I think it is quite clear that the questions being raised by the member opposite are directly in relation to the loss of life that her previous questions refer to. I think it would be very inappropriate to discuss any aspect of what is being investigated by the RCMP until we find the results of that investigation, receive a report from the RCMP, we have a report from the retired Supreme Court Justice who is having oversight to it. I look forward to receiving those reports. We will make decisions after that, what the next step should be.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. SPEAKER: Order, please!

The hon. the Member for St. John's Centre.

MS ROGERS: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I ask the Premier: Are the contents of the email supposedly written and sent by the RNC officer concerning details of the Dunphy case reflective of the policies of the Protective Services Unit?

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Minister of Justice.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. KING: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

As the Premier said on a number of occasions, the whole issue of the Dunphy shooting is very tragic, and all of us in this House, I am sure, extend our condolences to the family.

Let me be very clear as the Minister of Justice, on behalf of government, to the member's question. We are not prepared and will in no way entertain discussing the details that are pertinent to an ongoing investigation in that case before this House of Assembly until the investigations are concluded. At that point in time, as we have been very clear, the Fatalities Act provides me, as the Minister of Justice and Public Safety, with an opportunity to call an inquiry if I deem it necessary. It also provides Cabinet, the Lieutenant Governor in Council with an opportunity to call for an inquiry if they

deem it necessary. Up until those investigations are concluded, we are not prepared to discuss those details.

MR. SPEAKER: Order, please!

I remind the minister his time has expired.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Member for St. John's Centre.

MS ROGERS: Mr. Speaker, I ask the Premier: Did anyone in government assist in the writing, editing, or dissemination of that email?

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Minister of Justice and Public Safety.

MR. KING: I can only say, Mr. Speaker, it is a travesty what I am hearing here this afternoon. The member opposite is asking the Premier of this Province or the Minister of Justice to stand on their feet and discuss an ongoing criminal investigation in this Province. It is absolutely ridiculous what you are getting on with here today.

There is no place for any of us in this House of Assembly to discuss the nature of what transpired between the RNC and Mr. Dunphy and his family and what is currently before an ongoing investigation. I say it is shameful for the member to stand on her feet and raise that line of questioning here in this House of Assembly.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. SPEAKER: Order, please!

The time for Question Period has expired.

Presenting Reports by Standing and Select Committees.

Presenting Reports by Standing and Select Committees

MR. SPEAKER: I recognize the Member for Baie Verte – Springdale.

MR. POLLARD: Mr. Speaker, on behalf of the Select Committee appointed to draft a reply to the Speech from His Honour the Lieutenant Governor, I am pleased to present the report of the Select Committee which reads as follows:

To His Honour The Lieutenant Governor, the hon. Frank Fagan.

May it please Your Honour, we the Commons of Newfoundland and Labrador in legislative session assembled beg to thank Your Honour for the Gracious Speech which Your Honour has addressed to this House.

I move, seconded by the Member for Fortune Bay – Cape La Hune, that the report be adopted.

MR. SPEAKER: When shall the report be received, hon. Government House Leader?

MR. KING: Now.

MR. SPEAKER: Now.

On motion, report received.

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. Government House Leader, I believe you are going to move that the debate be deferred.

MR. KING: Yes, Mr. Speaker, with apologies.

I move, seconded by the Member for Baie Verte – Springdale, that debate on that matter be deferred.

MR. SPEAKER: Is it the pleasure of the House to adopt the motion?

All those in favour, 'aye.'

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Aye.

MR. SPEAKER: All those against, 'nay.'

Carried.

Further reports?

Tabling of Documents.

Notices of Motion.

Notices of Motion

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Minister of Natural Resources.

MR. DALLEY: Mr. Speaker, I give notice that I will ask leave to introduce a bill entitled, An Act To Amend The Hydro Corporation Act, 2007. (Bill 3)

Mr. Speaker, I give further notice that I will ask leave to introduce a bill entitled, An Act To Amend The Canada Newfoundland and Labrador Atlantic Accord Implementation Newfoundland and Labrador Act. (Bill 2)

MR. SPEAKER: Further notices of motion?

The hon. the Minister of Transportation and Works.

MR. BRAZIL: Mr. Speaker, I give notice that I will ask leave to introduce a bill entitled, An Act To Amend The Works, Service and Transportation Act. (Bill 4)

MR. SPEAKER: Further notices of motion?

Answers to Questions for Which Notice has been Given.

Petitions.

Petitions

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Member for St. John's North.

MR. KIRBY: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

To the hon. House of Assembly of the Province of Newfoundland and Labrador in Parliament assembled, the petition of the undersigned residents of Newfoundland and Labrador humbly sheweth:

WHEREAS many parents have expressed concern about the impact of overcrowding at Beachy Cove Elementary on student's mental and physical well-being; and

WHEREAS many parents have questioned the impact of major space restrictions at Beachy Cove Elementary and the ability of the school to

continue delivering quality curriculum to their growing student population; and

WHEREAS many parents have expressed concern about government's prolonged timelines to plan, tender, and construct the approved intermediate (Grade 5-9) school in Portugal Cove-St. Phillips;

WHEREUPON the undersigned, your petitioners, humbly pray and call upon the House of Assembly to urge government to provide all necessary resources in Budget 2015 and beyond to have the Portugal Cove-St. Phillips intermediate (Grade 5-9) school constructed, commissioned, and operational for students in September 2016.

As in duty bound, your petitioners will ever pray.

Mr. Speaker, this is not the first time I have presented this petition. I understand the community is still collecting signatures on this petition. It is an important one for the Town of Portugal Cove-St. Phillips for parents out there, for teachers, for the education community in general.

On a positive note, the Minister of Transportation and Works has called for tenders for the construction of this school. By my count – he could correct me if I am wrong – I believe there are five new schools that have been promised now that are going to be constructed and opened for September 2016. Four of them are on the Northeast Avalon in the communities of Conception Bay South, Paradise, Portugal Cove-St. Phillips. They have –

AN HON. MEMBER: Torbay.

MR. KIRBY: Torbay as well. In the case of Torbay, the school board wanted to build a school that was big enough to go up to Grade 8, but the member for the area said he did not want a school that was that big; he wanted a smaller school. So now the school board is going to send an extra grade to that school for him so they can jam them in sort of the way that they have it done out in Beachy Cove Elementary now. We will have to wait and see.

This is a tall order to get all these schools constructed for September 2016. Believe it or not I say to the minister, there are people out there who do not believe that is possible. I will give him the benefit of the doubt, but this is a really tight timeline. The people who signed this petition are extremely important in holding this minister and this government to their commitment.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

MR. SPEAKER: Order, please!

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

Orders of the Day

Private Members' Day

MR. SPEAKER: This being Private Members' Day and it now being 3:00 p.m., we go to Member for Conception Bay South to open debate on the private member's motion that stands on the Order Paper in his name.

The hon. the Member for Conception Bay South.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. HILLIER: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

It is a pleasure to stand here this afternoon and bring forward this private member's resolution dealing with a seniors' advocate. I read into the record the actual motion: BE IT RESOLVED that the House of Assembly urge government to establish a Seniors' Advocate Office.

Mr. Speaker, we first committed to establishing this advocate office last fall in 2014. We felt now is an appropriate time to bring the motion forward and go forward with this office. We believe this independent power to represent the rights and interests of seniors must be enshrined in legislation. Seniors deserve a strong, clear, independent voice to advocate on behalf of seniors.

Seniors' issues are a concern for everyone in Newfoundland and Labrador. For those of us who are not yet seniors, but will have the privilege of growing old one day, we will all be seniors.

Mr. Speaker, we have all quoted various statistics dealing with seniors and demographics that affect seniors and affect all of our population for some time. One that we use quite often is that 18 per cent of our population – over 93,000 people – are aged sixty-five plus. By 2025, one in four Newfoundlanders and Labradorians will be over sixty-five.

We have the most rapidly aging population in Canada. Overall, people are living longer and with that come pressing health care issues, such as increased incidence of dementia, as well as other disabilities and chronic conditions. With the population of Newfoundland and Labrador aging rapidly, the need to establish a seniors' advocate office to represent today's seniors is more and more pressing.

We have lost a lot of young people to outmigration. The cod moratorium of the 1990s sent many young people out west for work. Many have not returned. A major component of this population will be the children of today's seniors. So we have a boom in seniors, while many of their children who could help care for them and speak on their behalf live outside the Province.

Mr. Speaker, I would like to put a face on this issue of seniors' advocacy as we move forward this afternoon. Today is my mother-in-law's ninetieth birthday. We have not always seen eye-to-eye as a mother-in-law and a son-in-law, but we have buried the hatchet and we get along quite fine now.

AN HON. MEMBER: (Inaudible).

MR. HILLIER: There you go.

Mr. Speaker, Florence lives in a supportive care home. She is a good friend with the Member for Placentia – St. Mary's. She says she has voted both ways in her lifetime. She is in good health. So, on behalf of the forty-eight members here I wish Florence a happy birthday.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. HILLIER: Mr. Speaker, Florence has seven children. Any one of them could be her advocate at any time on most issues. Unfortunately, this is not the case for many

seniors in our Province. Hence, we are bringing forward this motion today to ensure that all of our seniors have an advocate.

Mr. Speaker, we speak with seniors on a daily basis. We speak with seniors when we come out of church. We speak with seniors at the supermarket. We speak with seniors at the gas station. Invariably, they want to know, what are your priorities for seniors? How are you going to help seniors move into the next phase of their lifetime?

Mr. Speaker, last month, I sat down with the seniors in my community, and I referenced this here at another point in time. It was evident that they were concerned about a bunch of things. They were concerned about health care. They were concerned about access to prescription medication. They were concerned about housing. They were concerned about recreational opportunities. They were also concerned about finding their way through the bureaucracy of government in order to access services. That is where we are going today, Mr. Speaker, with this private member's resolution on the seniors' advocate office.

Mr. Speaker, that group of people should be able to go into their retirement, go into their golden years, without those concerns. I say, what are seniors' issues in this Province should be the issues of every single one of us in this Province.

Mr. Speaker, we define senior in this Province as someone who is sixty-five-plus years old. With increased longevity, that plus could be twenty years, that plus could be thirty years, or that plus could even be forty years. Within those plus years, we have varying degrees of skills, we have varying degrees of experience, we have varying degrees of health and, as a result, we have varying degrees of ability to advocate for one's self.

With this motion today, we want to ensure that those who are unable to advocate for themselves will have their needs looked after by an advocacy office.

Mr. Speaker, government will point to the new Department of Seniors, Wellness and Social Development as a testament to their prioritizing seniors' issues. To be clear, we sincerely

appreciate the work of the division of seniors and their director. All too often, as we saw earlier this afternoon, when we called government out on a failure to manage, they shield themselves with the public service in an attempt to divert attention from this Administration's failure to lead.

Unlike the Division of Aging and Seniors, a seniors' advocacy office would be independent from government. The independence of this advocacy office would be enshrined in legislation. This independence would ensure that a strong, clear voice represents the rights and interests of seniors.

A seniors' advocate would not report to a government minister, or Cabinet. A seniors' advocate, Mr. Speaker, would report to the House of Assembly similar to the Child and Youth Advocate, the Citizens' Representative, and the Auditor General.

Mr. Speaker, seniors are a population that is vulnerable. Seniors are vulnerable to poverty. Seniors are vulnerable to isolation and loneliness. Seniors are vulnerable to health issues. Seniors are vulnerable to neglect and abuse. We need a strong, independent voice to identify, develop, implement, and evaluate the services and programs they and their families require.

We also need to keep in mind that seniors have a wide range of experiences and needs. We need to legislate the creation of a seniors' advocacy office to ensure seniors have a powerful and independent voice to represent the diversity of seniors. There are a host of issues that could benefit greatly from the input of a seniors' advocate including age-friendly communities, diversity, income and finances, secure housing, active living, lifelong learning, advanced care planning, and we could go on, Mr. Speaker.

In putting together this resolution today we sat down and said now what would be the specific role, what would this person's job look like? The role of a seniors' advocate would include monitoring policy, programs, and services to ensure they are meeting the needs of today's seniors' health care, transportation, et cetera.

The role of the seniors' advocate would include raising awareness around ageism and the experiences of seniors. The role of the seniors' advocate would include collaborating with seniors, their families and caregivers, policy makers, and front-line service providers to identify systemic issues that affect seniors and make recommendations to government accordingly.

Mr. Speaker, this advocate would be appointed to the seniors' advocacy office, selected by the proposed independent appointments commission – which is another Liberal commitment that we have made for some time. It would be on the basis of merit, not partisan affiliation.

Mr. Speaker, other advocacy offices in Newfoundland have already set a precedent here. For instance, the Office of the Child and Youth Advocate was established by statute – the Child and Youth Advocate Act – proclaimed in 2002. The Advocate for children and youth is a statutory office of the House of Assembly. The Advocate reports directly to the Legislature, through the Speaker of the House of Assembly, on matters relevant to their mandate.

Advocacy services are provided to children and youth through a central office located in St. John's, with outreach to all areas of the Province. Services can be accessed by contacting the office by telephone, email. Services can also be in person during advocacy outreach, conducted throughout the Province by advocacy staff. Mr. Speaker, this is a model similar to what we are envisioning as a seniors' advocacy office.

Another office that we have here in Newfoundland, which would be similar to that model, is the Office of the Citizens' Representative. That provides Province-wide ombudsman service, again going back to 2002, and is an independent office of the House of Assembly.

The primary work of the Citizens' Representative is to accept complaints from citizens who feel they have been treated unfairly with respect to their contact with government offices and agencies. The Citizens' Representative and his staff attempt to mediate citizens' complaints and if this is not possible,

will undertake an impartial and unbiased investigation. If the complaint cannot be resolved throughout the investigation, an investigation report is generated, and recommendations can be made to the House of Assembly. Again, Mr. Speaker, a similar model to what we are proposing for a seniors' advocacy office.

Mr. Speaker, this is not something new to Newfoundland. This is not something that we are inventing. The first seniors' advocacy office was opened in British Columbia just about a year ago. The role in British Columbia is similar to the role that we have outlined here for our seniors' advocate. That is, monitoring senior services, promoting awareness, working collaboratively with seniors, families, policy makers, service providers, and others to identify systemic issues that affect seniors and make recommendations to government. Mr. Speaker, BC's seniors' advocate believes that every province needs a similar advocacy role for seniors to protect a vulnerable population that is too often neglected.

To quote Ms Isobel Mackenzie, "I think that seniors are a diverse group of people with diverse needs. Having an office that can focus on those issues that affect significant numbers of seniors is important to ensure that they don't get drowned out in all of the other competing agendas."

Mr. Speaker, Alberta has since opened a seniors' advocacy office as part of their health advocates office and we know that the Opposition in Saskatchewan is calling for a similar office.

Mr. Speaker, if we were to go back through recent history and ask ourselves where the seniors' advocate would get involved, what issues would the seniors' advocate become involved with here in Newfoundland, we go down through the issue that we have with bed blockage, for instance. The aging baby boom came as no surprise to anyone, yet government did not prepare for all of this demographic change. We, therefore, have seniors stranded in acute care beds for lack of long-term options.

It is estimated that one-third of these patients have dementia. We are not meeting the health care needs of our population because

government failed to understand and prioritize the needs of an aging baby boom. This bed blockage is costing the system considerably, leaving seniors in limbo. Mr. Speaker, this is an issue that a seniors' advocate would certainly have been involved in.

We look at the Province's denture plan 2013. Government made significant cuts to the adult dental plan with zero consultation with dental health professionals. The adult dental plan now covers only half a set of dentures per year. Denturists cannot make dentures fit properly when beneficiaries can only be approved for half a set of dentures per year. This is a program that demonstrates a lack of respect for seniors, compromising their dignity. Mr. Speaker, seniors' dignity is an issue that a seniors' advocate would be involved in.

Mr. Speaker, to summarize, we simply urge government to establish a seniors' advocate office. We have identified a need for it, we have set out the role of such an office, we have identified precedence in other parts of the country, we have identified similar offices in our own Province, and we have identified cases where a seniors' advocate would undoubtedly have gotten involved. We now need the support of the remainder of this House to make this a reality.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Member for Fortune Bay – Cape La Hune.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MS PERRY: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

It is certainly an honour and a privilege for me to rise in this House of Assembly today to speak to this very important private member's resolution. Seniors are a very important part of our population, Mr. Speaker, and I am sure each and every one of us holds seniors near and dear in our hearts. I have often had friends say to me sometimes perhaps I have missed my calling because one of the greatest joys I have in life is working with seniors in particular.

When you look at the job of being a politician it is not always easy, it is often very challenging, but it is very rewarding as well. One of those greatest rewards comes from the work we do with our seniors and the assistance we provide to seniors.

I listened to my colleague in his introduction speak about the issues they see as to why there is a need for an advocate. The fact that people are living longer, Mr. Speaker, is something that we should all be very, very proud of. It means we get to enjoy our parents, our grandparents, our aunts and our uncles, our moms and dads, for so much longer. That is due, in large part, to significant improvements in our overall health care and our overall well-being as a people.

The motion calls for the establishment of an office to represent seniors. He spoke a little bit earlier about one of the concerns they have is finding their way through the bureaucracy. I have to say, Mr. Speaker, that as an MHA, that is something I pride myself on helping seniors with. It is something I pride myself on helping everyone with – seniors, youth, adults. Anyone who needs help navigating the system, that is the very reason for our being one of, Mr. Speaker, in addition to our lawmaking role here as legislators. So, I see our role as MHAs as being crucial in helping our seniors navigate the system.

Our Premier, Mr. Speaker, one of the very first things he did when he took office as Premier was establish a new Department of Seniors and Wellness, and in that he made a very strong statement to each and every one of us in his caucus, and to the Province as a whole, of the priority he places on seniors and how important seniors are to him. Creating this new department, I believe, certainly does reflect the changing reality in Newfoundland and Labrador that we do have an aging demographic.

The member opposite talked about statistics. By 2025, Statistics Canada estimates that Newfoundland and Labrador will have the highest proportion of seniors in the country. So I absolutely agree that seniors are a very key priority. As we move forward, we must be very cognizant of the fact that anything and everything we can do to help them in the best manner possible is what we should be looking

at, and I do see a lot of fabulous initiatives that are underway.

Mr. Speaker, I have to say there are in this Province already a large number of advocates for seniors. True, many seniors do not have children. My mom had thirteen and I do not have any. So when I think about aging, I am very cognizant of that fact. When I look at the health care system, when I look at programs and services, I am always cognizant of the fact that, we have to look at this as we are all going to be there one day and we want the very, very best possible for our seniors, and for all citizens in our Province.

Some of these agencies, institutions and groups that are in place for seniors include the Provincial Advisory Council on Aging and Seniors. This is comprised of thirteen members from across the Province. The group consults on a regular basis with seniors on issues, on policies and programs and services that are impacting older citizens and they provide feedback to government to enhance programs and services that are in place.

As I just mentioned, the Seniors and Aging division within the Department of Seniors, Wellness and Social Development is a centre of expertise on seniors' issues. They have a full contingent of staff who work very closely with individuals and groups on their various issues to help ensure that their needs are being met. Seniors can, as I spoke to, and certainly do contact their MHAs when they have issues of concern.

Speaking about one of the reasons why I love my job so much and the rewards you see, one of the huge impacts that we have been able to realize in helping seniors is the generic drug pricing policy. What a benefit to all of our citizens, and especially our seniors who can now afford the type of medications they need to help them continue to improve their longevity. That is one example of many. I am going to refer to many more in a short while.

The Office of the Citizens' Representative, which is independent of government – it has no connection whatsoever to government, it is an advocacy office – hears and follows up on concerns raised by any citizen if they feel they

have not been fairly treated. Our citizens' advocate, I do believe, Mr. Speaker, does an excellent job in that regard.

Again, going back to our role as MHAs and policy-makers, I am proud of a lot of things we have accomplished and achieved here in this House of Assembly, Mr. Speaker. One of the many is our Adult Protection Act, which we recently brought in. That provides a level of protection to all adults who lack capacity and who are experiencing neglect and abuse.

It really touches my heart when we speak to it in the House, especially when we were passing that act. I remember feeling very strongly and almost welling up at times at the thought of the abuse and neglect that can and do happen. We are doing everything we can through the citizens' advocate, through our new act, and through the existing agencies to try and help these people in any way we can. We have come a long way, Mr. Speaker, and no doubt, a long way yet still to go.

In terms of the types of initiatives that are in place today for seniors, I spoke about the generic drug pricing policy, which lowered the cost of drugs for everybody, but the Newfoundland and Labrador Prescription Drug Program has a component which is called the 65Plus Plan. That provides coverage of eligible prescription drugs for seniors who are over sixty-five years of age who receive Old Age Security and the Guaranteed Income Supplement. For seniors who are above that income bracket, the generic drug pricing policy was a significant help to them.

The other area I find we helped significantly with as MHAs, we helped with paperwork, Mr. Speaker. We helped individuals and citizens fill out applications, particularly seniors, many of whom, in my experience – like my mom, she stayed home and raised thirteen children. For her, filling out an application form was not easy.

So, as an MHA, that is something I take great pride and personal satisfaction from, when we can sit down at a table and help people put these applications together. Then, at the end of the day, they receive improvements to their home whereby they can continue living in their own home for much longer periods. Whether it is

new wheelchair accessibility ramps, whether it is modification to their bathrooms, or whether it is fixing a leaky roof or windows that are not energy efficient. That program certainly does a lot in my opinion to help seniors and all those people who are more vulnerable in our society.

In terms of long-term care and community support services, the *Close To Home* document that was prepared and released in June 2012 has a ten-year strategy to guide and transform the delivery of long-term care in the Province. We think with an investment of nearly \$700 million, the provision of long-term care and community support services across this Province is continually improving. Again, there is always room for improvement in any area. We are certainly very focused on making sure seniors remain a huge priority.

We also have in place, Mr. Speaker, a Community Rapid Response Team pilot project. The provincial government is investing \$3.1 million to four Community Rapid Response Teams. They will be comprised of health professionals who will assess patients at emergency departments to determine if medically stable patients can return home safely with enhanced community-based health services, thereby avoiding an admission to hospital. While the primary target group for this initiative is seniors, the service will be available to all adults, and teams are up and running in St. John's, Corner Brook, and Grand Falls-Windsor. These are some types of the initiatives that we are looking at putting in place to help seniors.

I do remember in 2007 – some things always stick in your head when you are in politics. Some things you never forget. As I was going door-to-door, I was learning so much before even being elected about what the job would entail. At almost every door there was a different issue or a different concern, something you knew that you would be advocating for on their behalf when you went to the House of Assembly if you got there.

One person in particular sat down and we had a lovely visit in her home. Her question to me was: What are you going to do for seniors? Mr. Speaker, when I went back to that same house in 2011, this person was so overjoyed with how much attention our government has paid to

seniors. Even something like the Newfoundland and Labrador Low Income Seniors' Benefit, which our government has increased over the last few years, today, that amount is up to \$1,036. I know that come October, November of each year seniors look forward to that payment. They know these additional funds are coming. It does help alleviate some of their financial concerns, no doubt.

When we look at what is out there for seniors in terms of people to speak up for them on their behalf, I would argue that there are some fantastic groups in this Province that are doing just that on behalf of seniors. We also have – and I have not talked about these a whole lot, but completely independent of government, Mr. Speaker, you have seniors groups like 50 Plus Clubs. I know I have five or six active 50 Plus Clubs in my region. When they want to talk to me about issues or have concerns, I am a phone call away and I am at their door. We bring their concerns back, in this case to the Minister of Seniors, Wellness and Social Development. The department works very diligently and the minister, to address those concerns.

We also have the Seniors Resource Centre, Mr. Speaker, which is a completely independent body; the 50+ Federation, as I said, independent; the Newfoundland and Labrador Public Sector Pensioners Association; and other groups such as this who provide advocacy on behalf of seniors. Certainly from my point of view in times of fiscal restraint, I would like to see as much done as we possibly can in terms of programs and services directly to the senior. I think we have come a long way in that regard. I have alluded to a few. I am sure more will be discussed as the afternoon goes on.

Seniors are indeed among a very special group of people in our Province. They have paved the way for us. They are the reason we are here. Everything and anything we can do to make life better for them is what matters. I think those are tangible things. Tangible things like improvements to their houses. Tangible things like the amount of money they are bringing into their households. Tangible things like repairs through the Newfoundland and Labrador Home Modification Program, the energy efficiency program, like the REEP program, Mr. Speaker.

Seniors are wonderful. As an MHA, I certainly will advocate for each and every single one, not just in my district but in the Province as a whole. Anyone who wants to call me with a seniors' issue, I am here, and I am sure most of my colleagues in this entire House feel the exact same way.

Certainly I look forward to the rest of this debate this afternoon and I look forward to, as a Province and a government, continuing to implement programs and services as identified by the seniors themselves as programs they need and to continue working with them towards improvements overall.

I certainly feel confident that the Department of Seniors and Wellness does a phenomenal role in this regard. Again I go back to how I started earlier today. The Premier has, in one of his very first actions as Premier, established a new Department of Seniors and Wellness. It clearly speaks to the priority he places on seniors, the priority we as a government place on seniors, and I look forward to more fabulous things coming from the Department of Seniors and Wellness.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Member for Virginia Waters.

MS C. BENNETT: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I am pleased to stand in this House today on behalf of the constituents of Virginia Waters and speak to this private member's resolution that my colleague has read into the record for today.

Mr. Speaker, independent power to represent the rights and interests of seniors is important. That is why we are advocating that a seniors' advocate, which is an independent office, be established. It is an independent voice to advocate on behalf of seniors to government. As has been spoken to many times already in this House, seniors' issues are a concern for everyone in Newfoundland and Labrador. Certainly for those of us who are not seniors yet, if we have the privilege of growing old one day, we will certainly be seniors.

Mr. Speaker, members of this House are well aware that Newfoundland and Labrador has the most rapidly aging population in Canada. Overall, people are living longer and with that comes pressing health care issues, such as the increased incidences of dementia as well as other disabilities and chronic conditions.

I have heard members opposite talk about government's new department of Seniors, Wellness and Social Development. I would like to talk for a minute about the difference between those two – and let me be perfectly clear; we sincerely appreciate the work of the division of seniors and their director. All too often, when we call government out on their failure to manage, they shield themselves with the public service in an attempt to divert attention from this Administration's failure to lead, but the reality is that this department employs four people serving almost one-fifth of the entire population.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Oh, oh!

MR. SPEAKER: Order, please!

MS C. BENNETT: Unlike the Division of Aging and Seniors, a seniors' advocacy office would be independent from government. The independence of the seniors' advocate would be enshrined in legislation. The seniors' advocate would not report the government minister or Cabinet; the seniors' advocate would report to the House of Assembly, similar to the Child and Youth Advocate, the Citizens' Representative, and the Auditor General. So, why do we need a seniors' advocate? Quite frankly, the issues facing seniors and seniors themselves are diverse.

We need to keep in mind that seniors have a wide range of experiences and needs. We need to legislate the creation of a seniors' advocacy office to ensure that seniors have a powerful and independent voice and represent the diversity of seniors.

There are a host of issues that could benefit greatly from the input of a seniors' advocate including age-friendly communities, diversity, income and finances, home housing, active living, lifelong learning, advanced care planning, safety, and violence prevention. Mr. Speaker, one of the most important reasons we

need a seniors' advocate is that seniors are a population that are vulnerable to poverty, to isolation and loneliness, to health issues, neglect and abuse, including financial abuse.

Mr. Speaker, it is with this in mind that I would like to speak to the issue that is facing numerous seniors in our Province, and that is the issue of pension overpayments. Let me be clear, we have been speaking out loud and clear on this issue because it has brought undue stress and uncertainty to many of our pensioners.

While we do not question the professional capabilities of the liaison Mr. Bonnell, I will tell you that we take issue with the fact that this government has put him in this capacity, despite the fact that we have recently learned he is a former treasurer for a Conservative district association and a former bank manager for some of the pensioners involved. We take issue with the fact that these resources could be better focused on recovering unpaid fines, make sure oil royalties were completed, and the myriad of things that we have been challenging government to do a better job of managing their finances with.

We take issue with the fact that government has their sights set squarely on the wallets of these pensioners, when we know in the long run they will spend more time and resources trying to recover what money they can. Quite frankly, we take issue that this government is ignoring their moral and legal obligation.

Mr. Speaker, let me share some comments from many of our constituents about this situation, and I quote, "Shame on government for causing this man undue stress. It was governments mistake, now live up to it. Don't even make the attempt to squeeze blood from a turnip. I'm sure you can find savings elsewhere without causing hardship for our pensioners."

Another example: "This is wrong. The amounts owed are small compared to overall government finances. It was government's mistake. The government should absorb the loss, given the catastrophic loss it will be for low-income seniors. They will be forced to decide between paying the heating bill or buying food. No one should have to make that desperate choice."

Another example: "The government made the mistake, let them take the hit for it. How is a pensioner supposed to know that he was overpaid by \$18.00 a month? That government should be ashamed of themselves. Aren't there audits required yearly or at least every two years? This should have been caught years ago. Somebody really fumbled the ball"

Lastly, an example of what our constituents are saying to us: a true injustice.

Mr. Speaker, I refer to the moral licence this government has for asking for this collection of money. After months of detailing government's financial mismanagement, sadly we are forced to look at another example, one that is hitting some of our very vulnerable people; vulnerable people who would have the advantage of having an advocate that worked for them with a seniors' advocate. This issue is one that is hitting some very vulnerable people. I am referring to the clerical error that resulted in 427 seniors being overpaid their pensions.

The minister wants to correct the mistake, and the correction is asking seniors to pay back money they received in error over many, many years. He has decided not to collect the money from people in long-term care facilities. He has decided not to collect the money from survivors, but I continue to be dumbstruck to understand the rationale for this decision to ask for the money back.

The reality is, Mr. Speaker, absolutely government has a responsibility to protect the public purse. It is with this responsibility in mind that the Leader of the Official Opposition has been holding government to task. Besides asking for answers regarding the cancellation of Humber Valley Paving's bond, we have been challenging government to do a better job in auditing oil royalties, collecting unpaid fines, expeditiously implementing recommendations of the Auditor General, and explaining write offs of taxpayers' money to numerous businesses.

All these areas represent risk to the public purse and hundreds of millions of dollars, but instead of aggressively addressing these-risk areas, the Tories plan to collect a diminished amount of money, and now with an extra cost, the cost of collecting by asking seventy and eighty year

olds to pony up. These pensioners are being hit by hastily developed and now evolving government repayment plan, while most of them are already burdened to survive.

Why couldn't the ministers need to correct it mean to stop future payments and carrying on? Why has government chosen to keep people worried and anxious about repaying this money at a time that the minister now says collection will be limited and even more costly than the original plan?

Let me speak now to the legal authority. Though, there is a statutory right under the Public Service Pensions Act to recover overpayments, there is also a body of case law which can prevent recovery of overpayments when individuals have changed their circumstances in reliance on the understanding that the amount they received was the amount to which they are entitled to.

For example, there is a Newfoundland Supreme Court case where the principle was applied to compel an appeal board to consider whether the attempt of the department to recover overpayment be denied. The attempt to recover was denied. It is unfair to force elderly pensioners to repay monthly money they honestly received and relied upon to organize their affairs through no fault of their own. Any overpayment arrangement offered by the Province, however lenient, would be exacerbated by the fact that from this point forward their pensions will be reduced to the correct amount.

Further to this, section 33 of the Teachers' Pension Plan Act is nearly identical to section 29 of the Public Service Pension Plan Act. This is the statutory provision that creates the right of the Province, and in this case the corporation, to recover an overpayment. I would note, in both cases that the section of this legislation says these words, "may collect." This means there is discretion, and it is not mandatory to recover such an overpayment pursuant to either statutory provision; however, if a decision is made to pursue recovery of an overpayment, that does not mean the person from whom it is sought to recover an overpayment does not have what I believe a strong defence to the overpayment recovery attempt.

The Newfoundland Supreme Court case I referred to is an example of how the equitable defence of change in circumstance can be used to prevent the minister from being permitted to recover the overpayment, and I read from the judge's decision in the court case. I have been shown no reason why a defence of change in circumstance, not apply to mistakes of fact of law made by a Crown official where the legislation authorized in recovery does not explicitly exclude this defence.

He goes on to say, the individual in question would have changed her position to enjoy a more relaxed and a rich standard of life during a period when she was receiving the overpayments by mistakes. It is reasonable to expect that they would make expenditures which they would not have otherwise made upon receipt of those overpayments to which they believe they are entitled to.

Mr. Speaker, a seniors' advocate in this situation could easily be asked by these 427 to look objectively at the moral licence this government has to make this request and, I would argue, at the legal right this government has to make this request and advocate on behalf of these seniors who are ranging, in some cases, in their seventies and eighties waiting to hear what this government is going to do. I do not believe the people of the Province want seventy and eighty year olds sitting in their homes worried about when somebody is going to call and give them a description of how they are going to be paid. So far these seniors have received multiple phone calls and will continue to receive multiple letters. Mr. Speaker, some would argue that that is elder abuse. Again, a reason why a seniors' advocate independent of government, independent of government ministers, could do the work of advocating on behalf of seniors.

Quite frankly, Mr. Speaker, this situation of pension overpayments is the exact reason why there is a significant difference between what this Premier has done to support seniors and what the Leader of the Opposition wants to do when he wants to support seniors, and that is provide an independent advocate that works in the best interests of seniors only and not in the best interest of the government.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Member for Exploits.

MR. FORSEY: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

It is always a pleasure to stand up in this House of Assembly and speak on any type of legislation and statements that come to the floor. Today, in particular, I am really pleased to have the opportunity to address the House of Assembly especially when it comes to our most vulnerable, which is our seniors.

Mr. Speaker, this government which I am a part of and our Premier, along with all of us, everybody in this House, and I mean everyone in this House, certainly have a focus and a heart for looking after our seniors.

I probably will take an opportunity to just talk about it on a personal issue, in a personal way, that I am sure a lot of us can do the very same thing. I had the good fortune to be able to look after my parent for a number of years who had serious disabilities, but the programs that were in place, Mr. Speaker – and I know you are quite familiar with a lot of them – that this government provides made my job a lot easier, and the services that we were able to provide for my parent.

As a matter of fact, after her passing, I have the opportunity again now to look after a parent which is one of my in-laws, my wife's parent, under the same circumstances, Mr. Speaker. I think we all have a feel for what we need to do. We are becoming seniors – some of us are getting pretty close ourselves and we are going to be looking for this sort of thing.

This government has put a seniors' department in place. Our Premier, when he was sworn in back in last September, early October, one of his mandates was to set up the department for seniors. I must say, our minister is doing quite the bang up job on it.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. FORSEY: That particular department was set up to sort of set a path for where we want to go as a government, and what we want to do and

the initiatives we want to bring in to support our seniors – and there have been many, but what we were able to do with the formation of this department was to put all of our services provided to seniors in the one department. Prior to that, we were running all over the place. If we wanted something to do with housing, we went to one department. If we wanted something to do with health or dental or whatever it was, we had to go to another department. Now, it is all under the umbrella of one department.

Looking after our seniors and our seniors' needs I think is one of the main focuses certainly of this government and of this Premier; otherwise, he would not have formed the department that he did. It was new, it was his idea, and it was a great initiative for this government, Mr. Speaker.

In doing so – and I know the Opposition, I am sure their heart is in the right place, like ours is, but I was listening to a talk show a while ago and I remember the host saying the Opposition says that we are overspending, but they want us to spend more.

We have a department right now that is working very, very well, but the Opposition wants us to spend more money for an advocate, which is going to be a greater cost to the government and to the Province. They say one thing over here, but they are saying a different thing over here. You cannot do that. You cannot say that someone is overspending, but then when they stand up they want you spend more. That does not even make sense. I really do not understand their reasoning. They will get up there and they will say that we are overspending.

Mr. Speaker, I listened to a couple of speakers today, and I listened to my colleague for Fortune Bay – Cape La Hune who spoke about a lot of the services that we provide. She did a very good job, and I am sure could have continued longer if she had the time. I know that I am probably going to be repetitious, but that is what you get when you are speaking on such a topic like seniors that we have so much consideration and interest in.

We are now and will continue to listen. That is why we have the department for seniors. We also have the Citizens' Representative which is

the go-to person. It is already in place. If there is an issue in the Province and they feel they have been done wrong, or they need some assistance to make sure they are on the right path besides the department, besides the MHAs who live in the districts and represent the districts, that is the Citizens' Representative's job. That is what he is there for. He can access all that information for any citizen out there, senior or not, and can look after their interest.

Also, Mr. Speaker, the Provincial Advisory Council on Aging and Seniors – and I do believe my colleague for Fortune Bay – Cape La Hune mentioned this one – has thirteen members throughout the Province. This group consults with seniors on issues, policies, and services impacting older adults and provides feedback to government.

Mr. Speaker, seniors can contact their MHAs. Every district out there has an MHA and I am sure we are all available to the seniors. I will just speak for the District of Exploits. I have always had the opportunity to visit the 50 Plus Clubs and the seniors clubs. I have sat down with them. We have programs in place for funding that they can apply to for their recreation, for healthy aging, and for wellness. They take advantage of that. They love it actually. Every group of seniors out there who I deal with really takes advantage of this and appreciate this because it gets them out, it keeps them active, and it keeps them healthy. That is what our goal is, to keep people more –

MR. POLLARD: Engaged.

MR. FORSEY: – engaged. I thank the Member for Baie Verte – Springdale for that. I lose a word every now and then but he picks it up for me. I really appreciate that, so do not move.

When I visit them they talk about – actually, I will talk about one group. One group went out of the district because we did not have a bowling alley in our district; they had to go to Grand Falls-Windsor. They went to Grand Falls-Windsor for bowling because we were able to support them in their trip and their activity, and they asked me to come along with them. They really enjoyed it.

Mr. Speaker, MHAs are the main contact for seniors. They come to my office like they do I am sure in all district offices. They come in and they say I am looking for a form for the rebate, the Home Heating Rebate program. We have hundreds of them come in. They come in and they want to know about the Home Repair Program. They want to know about the REEP program, and then they will ask for the applications. They will ask us to help them fill it out. That is what we are all about.

I do not think a seniors' advocate is going to go out into the district and sit down with a senior and help them fill out an application. It is not going to happen. That is what we are there for, Mr. Speaker.

The Seniors and Aging division with the Department of Seniors, Wellness and Social Development is a centre of expertise on seniors' issues. When it comes to seniors' issues, the Seniors and Aging division within the Department of Seniors, Wellness and Social Development is the place. That is where they need to go.

Mr. Speaker, I also recall some of the things this government has put in place. I know I do not have time to talk about all of it, but my colleague brought up the Adult Protection Act. I remember when we introduced that here in the House of Assembly a couple of years ago I had the opportunity to speak on it. In a lot of cases, years ago I guess adults were probably being neglected and probably being abused, but like everything, we have come a long way, Mr. Speaker.

We brought in this protection and this act – for anybody out there. By the way, I know there has already been a report done on it a couple of weeks ago. This can apply to someone in their own home if they are being abused, someone in a personal care home or in a nursing home. So that protection is there, and it does not affect the one who is reporting it. The one who is reporting it does not get involved in the report.

That was a very, very important act we brought in there, Mr. Speaker. It will continue to help our adults who cannot really look after themselves and cannot protect themselves. For the ones who are still active and the aging who

are getting out and having recreation, Mr. Speaker, we have put lot of supports and funding in place for our seniors.

I would just like to touch on a couple of investments we have made as a department through, now the Department of Seniors. I mentioned Newfoundland and Labrador Housing a little earlier and the Home Repair Program. Well, the Affordable Housing Agreement, this year we signed an unprecedented five-year agreement with the federal government of \$68 million, which extends into the Home Repair Program, and 2,100 households with low income to repair their home have already taken advantage of it. This is like a huge program.

When I say affordable housing – affordable housing, yes, for people, but these are senior people. These are mostly seniors who take advantage of this so they can live in comfortable housing, live independently, because it is affordable. They do not have to go through the expense and the cost they went through years ago, Mr. Speaker, because of the services that we brought in.

The Residential Energy Efficiency Program – I know I referred to it earlier as the REEP program and that is what it is, the Residential Energy Efficiency Program – \$12 million over three years to assist up to 1,000 low-income homeowners per year with energy retrofits. That is the kind of things we are doing as a government. That is the initiatives we are bringing in as a government, and it is all under the one umbrella now which makes it a lot easier.

There are so many other programs that we have brought in. I know my colleague from Fortune Bay – Cape La Hune mentioned the drug program, which is an awesome program; also the dental program, which is an awesome program.

I meet with seniors on a day-to-day basis in my district. I am sure every member does, because we have a soft spot for them. We want to listen and we want to help them. I do not think we would pass a senior and say we are not doing anything for them. That is not going to happen. That is not where we are.

So, as a government, and as a member of this government, I feel that the initiatives we have taken have been tremendous. Yes, we have more to do. There is no question about it, but I am glad our Premier brought in the department for seniors.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. FORSEY: Absolutely, we all appreciate it. I am certainly pleased to be able to work with the minister for the department of seniors. We have all been able to access the information that we need, as an MHA, to bring it back to the people we want to look after, which is our most vulnerable and our most favourite, which is our seniors, Mr. Speaker.

With that, I will take my chair.

Thank you very much for the time.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Member for St. John's Centre.

MS ROGERS: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

I am very happy to stand and to speak to this private member's motion that reads: BE IT RESOLVED that the House of Assembly urge Government to establish a Seniors' Advocate Office.

Clear, plain and simple, no ambiguity here, nothing to wonder about. I believe that the issue is clear, that the issue is that simple.

I would like to start off by congratulating this government for establishing a Department of Seniors, Wellness and Social Development. I know the department is getting its feet under it, that it is looking at innovative ways of serving the needs of seniors across the Province. I have to say, Mr. Speaker, I applaud that initiative. I am very, very glad to see that.

I have had several opportunities to speak to the current Minister of Seniors, Wellness and Social Development on a number of issues that affect seniors. I believe he was very attentive. I believe he took some of the concerns I brought

to him on behalf of my constituents, I believe he took them seriously, but there are a number of issues that are not being addressed, or that the department cannot address, or that the department does not feel is in its mandate, or that this government is not prepared to address. Some of those issues we have to look at. We have to see, what would be the role of a seniors' advocate?

I would also like to start off by saying we have to stop talking about seniors as if all our seniors are vulnerable, little, frightened, isolated, incapacitated people. That is not the truth. As we age, oftentimes we need different kinds of services, or as we age we may need more services. For some, their senior years are more difficult because of issues of poverty, because of issues of health or ill health, because of issues of geographical isolation or distance from support services.

We cannot keep talking about our seniors as if it is just one big block of vulnerable, frightened, timorous people. As a matter of fact, Mr. Speaker, many seniors are able to speak on their own behalf. We are seeing more and more activism on behalf of seniors undertaken by seniors, and that is a good thing.

I imagine you would be wondering, well, am I supporting this or not? Absolutely, Mr. Speaker, I am supporting this private member's motion.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MS ROGERS: I am absolutely supporting this private member's motion, not because the new Seniors, Wellness and Social Development department is not doing a good job – I am confident that it will attempt to do the best job it possibly can.

We have to look at the reality that we are facing. We all know – we have all talked about this – that the proportion of our population is aging. That proportion, that geographic, that demographic shift is happening rapidly. There are no ifs, ands, or buts about it. That presents certain challenges to us.

We are going to have to be very vigilant, extremely vigilant about the basic human rights of seniors in Newfoundland and Labrador. We

are going to have to be very vigilant about the needs.

Also, when we see our shrinking health care dollars – particularly when we see the end of the Canada Health Accord. When we see our shrinking health care dollars – and it is not that seniors are a drain on our health care system. We know that the cost of health care increases in end-of-life services, not necessarily that seniors are overburdening our health care system.

There are a lot of seniors who are in great shape and have been in great shape. They will live their sixties, their seventies, their eighties in great shape so we have to stop seeing them as absolutely vulnerable. We have to stop seeing them as a drain on our health care dollars. That is not the reality of the lives of seniors in our Province, but again because of our geography, because of poverty, because of ill health and chronic health conditions, there are certain problems and there are certain challenges.

This role of seniors' advocate is definitely not about helping people to fill out forms. That would be absolutely ridiculous, and I do not think that is what is being proposed. We have to look at, our challenge – and we have heard this in the House in the fast few months, the economic challenge that we have, with the shrinking cost of oil and how that has impacted us. So, we are going to have to constantly balance in the next little while – this what the government is telling us – constantly balance costs and costs of services. How do we keep costs affordable by maintaining access to care and maintaining actual access to care?

What would be the role of the seniors' advocate – and again, we are supporting a seniors' advocate because in December of 2014 my colleague, the Member for Signal Hill – Quidi Vidi, in this House called and asked the Premier to establish an office of a seniors' advocate. We are definitely, definitely supporting this. What she said is that an independent seniors' advocate would oversee the provision of provincial senior services such as health, personal services, housing, transportation, income supports, to name a few. The role of that seniors' advocate is to look at everything that government does through the lens of the experience of seniors and the needs of seniors.

It is long overdue. We see that there is a movement in other provinces and in other countries to have a seniors' advocate to do that kind of work. What kind of work would a seniors' advocate do? Well, you can be darn sure, Mr. Speaker, that the seniors' advocate would be listening to people who are talking about changes in the adult dental program. They want to take a look at that. They want to sink their teeth into that issue, because that is an issue that affects not only whether or not somebody has pearly whites, but it affects people's general health, also a general sense of well-being.

A seniors' advocate would look at the issue of housing. We know almost every mayor in Newfoundland and Labrador last year identified housing as one of the main issues in their communities and identified that they felt that there was a housing crisis, particularly as it relates to seniors. We have seniors all over the Province who are living in houses that are too big for them, yet they cannot afford to downsize. We also have seniors who are renting. I know I have mentioned this in the House a number of times. We have the highest proportion in the whole country of seniors in receipt of OAS and GIS, which means that their average income is \$1,100 a month.

So imagine if you are a senior living alone and you have to rent. So, a very modest estimate renting a safe, accessible unit for a senior, \$700, you would be hard-pressed. Mr. Speaker, we know you would be hard-pressed. Certainly in St. John's, in Happy Valley-Goose Bay, Lab City, you would be a hard-pressed to find anything under \$1,000.

Let us pretend you could actually find something for \$700. Now you have \$1,100 a month to live on. So your rent is \$700. Your heat and light, conservatively, is \$200. Your phone and cable – because that is not a luxury, that is a necessity – that is \$100. So out of \$1,100, already before you talk about transportation, before you talk about food, before you talk about clothing, before you talk about getting a haircut, before you talk about buying your granddaughter a graduation present, your expenses before any of that are \$1,000 a month, and your income is only \$1,100.

You could be darn sure that a seniors' advocate is going to look at something like that, because a seniors' advocate is going to say we have a problem here. We have a growing population of seniors. We have the highest percentage of seniors in receipt of OAS and GIS. We have the highest percentage of seniors in the country, therefore, living below the poverty line. If I was seniors' advocate, I can tell you I sure would want to be looking at that.

I would want to look at every policy and every procedure and every piece of legislation that might affect how seniors are able to live and thrive and survive in our communities. Because the prosperity that we experience today, the society that we have today, was built on their backs, by the sweat of their brow. All of us are the product of a senior right now – even though some of us are still seniors. Unfortunately, many of us, our folks have passed on because of our ages.

What else would a seniors' advocate look at? I would think that a seniors' advocate would look at the whole issue of rent supplements and how they affect seniors. So if you are in one apartment and for some reason you are being evicted because the landlord is going to double the rent, or renovate or whatever, and you want to live in that same neighbourhood that is close to your church and close to your community and close to your favourite grocery store, and close to your doctor and your hospital, well what happens now is that if you are going to get a rent supplement because you have had one before, you cannot get one and take it with you. You have to go where the rent supplements are attached to the rental units. We know that is not working in the lives of seniors.

I have heard a little hint from the Minister Responsible for Seniors, Wellness and Social Development that he is looking at that, because he gets it. That is why it is so important to have a department of seniors because hopefully then the minister gets it. He gets what impacts the lives of seniors in our Province.

I am kind of hoping – I have been talking about this for a few years now, making those rent supplements affordable, particularly for seniors. I am thinking that is the kind of thing that a seniors' advocate is going to look at. The

seniors' advocate is also going to look at the Home Heating Rebate. Do you know what happens right now? If you live in an apartment building or a house where you are paying rent and your heat and light is included in your rent, you are not eligible for the Home Heating Rebate. Did you know that?

It makes no sense because you are paying for heat and light because it is included in your rent. If you were not, your rent would be lower and then you would be paying directly to the utility. I would think that the seniors' advocate would be looking at that kind of thing.

The other thing that the seniors' advocate would be looking at is the whole issue of long-term care, and boy that is a big one, Mr. Speaker. It is a big one because we have so many seniors living in long-term care and so many seniors on waiting lists. We know that there are seniors in hospitals who are ready to move on but there is no place for them to move to, or they have to move far away from their communities, far away from their spouse, or far away from their family and all of their supports.

I cannot imagine how horrible that would be to be eighty-seven years old, to be physically feeble, and to be sent to a long-term care facility far away from your family, from your spouse, from the person who you slept in that bed beside them for sixty years; I cannot imagine how tough that must be.

The other thing a seniors' advocate will look at is the whole issue of home care and how so many seniors have told us they want to live in their home and they need just a little bit more care in order to be able to do that. It is far less expensive on our system, yet we do not have a comprehensive public home care system. We have a system where people have to pay out of their pockets for home care. There is a needs assessment. We have a system that sometimes is not managed very well.

My previous home phone number was one digit off from the phone number of a home care agency. How many times seniors would call me by accident because it was one digit off and they would say, where are you? My home care worker is not here, I am alone, I cannot get out of bed, and I need help.

So a seniors' advocate would look at those kinds of issues, on the kinds of issues that affect the lives of seniors. Government at this point – because we know that the needs are growing and they are growing exponentially and rapidly, one would think that a government, in fact, would want the services of a seniors' advocate. I can assure you that the seniors of Newfoundland and Labrador certainly want the services of a seniors' advocate. That is what this is about. It is about serving the needs of seniors and responding to their needs.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. SPEAKER (Littlejohn): The hon. the Minister of Seniors, Wellness and Social Development.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. JACKMAN: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

It is certainly an interesting debate. It is a very personal debate.

Mr. Speaker, when you get called into Cabinet, you get a call from the Premier. The Premier will say to you – have a little chat. It seems like he will hold you out there for a little bit because you are not sure what he is going to say to you and where he is going to put you. There are some departments you may not want to go into.

Mr. Speaker, he called me and he said we are constructing a new Department of Seniors, Wellness and Social Development and I would like for you to lead it. Then he went on to speak about why. In that, there is always that personal side.

Many of us, like the member just mentioned, lost our parents. My father died very young. My mother died just a little over two years ago. The thing that has changed, Mr. Speaker – and people have talked about demographics. I believe the Member for Fortune Bay – Cape La Hune said there were twelve children in her family.

Well, I jokingly say this about my family. My father and two of his brothers and their wives,

between three families there are forty children. I said it is a double baseball team, a busload of kids. Mr. Speaker, the thing about my mother was that there were enough of us – all of her ten children are alive – to provide and take turns to help out with her care and, very fortunately, she did not spend time in hospital.

Mr. Speaker, we know the demographics have changed. The Member for Fortune Bay – La Hune said twelve; she has no children. I have to say I have five children. We have eleven grandchildren and another one on the way, so I am hoping we have enough that – you know, I am a little grey on the top – somebody will look after me.

Mr. Speaker, the thing that we have facing us is a demographic that we just simply cannot ignore and, more importantly, we should not ignore. I have had the opportunity to speak on several occasions in front of groups that represent seniors, or 50 Plus Clubs, and the one thing that I have said over and over again: We should never allow our seniors to become to be seen as liabilities. We know there is a challenge, Mr. Senior – Mr. Speaker, I can assure you one thing. You are not quite there yet, Mr. Speaker. The grey is starting to come through, Mr. Speaker; that is the first sign.

Mr. Speaker, on a serious note, and people have said it here, these are the people who have built our communities, they are the grandparents of our children and they are the ones who have served on the committees in our Province, served on the church groups, and they deserve our utmost respect.

Some of the people have talked about MHAs getting calls. I went to the district of the Member for Cape St. Francis and to see how, as MHAs, he and all of us interact with seniors. We want to do our best – and departments. I do not want to negate the Department of Transportation and Works, but that is a department that is about asphalt and roads. This department that we have, that I am in charge of, is about people and one particular part of that department is around seniors.

I, as minister, I have said it and I am going to say it again, that I am going to do my utmost to

make sure seniors get the representation that they deserve.

A question comes down, and it has been presented by the Opposition party, is do we have a seniors' advocate? Mr. Speaker, I am about trying to do and get the dollars that I can that best fit where and serve the seniors of this Province. Then people will have to make a judgement on that.

The Member for Conception Bay South, I saw him in church. I go to church regularly. I saw him there one day. I did not know he was a Liberal until the election came around. Likewise, we see in our churches when we go there the demographics, the number of older people who are there. They deserve to get from us and get from government and get from our coffers what they can. From my perspective, I do believe seniors have access to enough groups and individuals, like the Citizens' Rep that has been mentioned, that they can have their voice heard.

Now, what we have to do, Mr. Speaker, is we have to invest our dollars in programs that support seniors. The Member for St. John's Centre mentioned a number of people who are on OAS, Old Age Security. Mr. Speaker, she is right. Look at the income they get. What is it that we can do to support them?

One of the things that we have done is we put in the prescription drug plan, the 65Plus Plan. That ensures that those on low income pay no more than \$6 for a prescription when they go there. Now, that costs us \$50 million a year. I do not want to tag dollars on it, but I just say that to point out some of the investments we have made to ensure that these people, those on the lower end, are supported so that they can get their prescription.

The age-friendly grants that we put out there. The low income benefit; all of us know many of our constituents will look to when that dollar arrives in the mail in October. It has gone from \$971 – I think it is up to \$1,036. So it is something that comes in their hands that they recognize. I do not think people realize sometimes that it costs around \$40 million to put that in place.

Then, through Newfoundland and Labrador Housing, I can guarantee you there is not an MHA in this House who does not know what the Provincial Home Repair Program is.

MS ROGERS: (Inaudible).

MR. JACKMAN: There is a what?

MS ROGERS: There is a problem with it (inaudible).

MR. JACKMAN: If there is a problem with it, Mr. Speaker, to the Member for St. John's Centre, that is the thing we need to put our investments in, to work on that. She has made some suggestions, Mr. Speaker, I will not give her credit for it, but we were looking at it because when I went into the department first, I had a couple of requests come to me and asked about portable subsidies.

Mr. Speaker, we are taking a look at it to see if – we can trust some of our people out there, Mr. Speaker. We can trust our people out there to decide, this is where I want to live and would you allow me to take my dollar with me to go there; but, we are not going the whole gamut right in the first phase. We will try it in particular areas and then if it is successful, then we do further implementation.

Mr. Speaker, another issue I have seen is the challenge in urban rural, there is no doubt about it.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Oh, oh!

MR. SPEAKER: Order, please!

MR. JACKMAN: There is no doubt about it, that the challenge in the urban areas sometimes – the cost of living, there is no doubt, is higher than what it would be in rural Newfoundland and Labrador. So let's explore and see what opportunities exist that could make it better for those who live in urban areas. We know, for example, that with what has happened in the past number of years with the oil industry coming more online, we know where rentals have gone. We know where the cost of living is. Let's take a look at those types of things and see where it can take us, Mr. Speaker.

Another thing we are attempting to do, we have a pilot transportation project happening. I had not really thought of it before, but I went to federal-provincial territorial meetings on seniors a few months back, and they were asking and talking about seniors issues and they identified what the three top issues were facing seniors. One was finance. The second is housing. This is the one that I had not thought of that much, it was isolation. It is isolation.

Just think of a senior who lives alone in a house, and our winters sometimes start in November and go right on through to June, and these people are confined. Think of the mental strength that a person needs to be able to live in those circumstances. Therefore, one of the things we have done, Mr. Speaker, is we are attempting pilot projects in five areas of the Province. We are doing a project with the Red Cross, we are doing a project with the St. John's Metrobus, and we are doing one in Springdale, Cape St. George, and Clarendville.

Mr. Speaker, what that will provide us is information to be able to assist all people, but we find that many of the programs we put in place to assist our entire population, the seniors take up a fair number of them. From that we will garner more information and then make some further decisions as we move into supporting seniors.

If I go down through the list, the Provincial Home Repair Program – and I believe it was the Member for Exploits who mentioned the Affordable Housing agreement that we have entered into with the federal government, \$68 million; \$40 million of that will continue into the Provincial Home Repair Program, those types of programs. The other \$28 million or so will go into these affordable units.

All of us in this House in every side of government have recently received some of these in their districts. The great thing that I have to say that I see with these is they do get services provided, like snow clearing and whatnot, and it allows seniors to age in their own communities longer with less to maintain. The most important part of that is they maintain their independence. Another good part of it, Mr. Speaker, is sometimes they are built quite close together and they are company for each other.

They might be built and a balcony is there so that seniors can interact with each other.

I would say another group that many of us have mentioned here, the 50 Plus Clubs that we are getting – and this is an interesting dynamic that I have seen. You are getting some of the 50 Plus people getting in there. These are the ones who are engaging the seniors and then getting them out into the community, getting them to become a part of their club, and then getting them out of their homes.

Mr. Speaker, my time is winding down. I am going to end where I started off. One is that when I received the call from the Premier I knew what his commitment was to the seniors of this Province and this department. There is no doubt about that.

The second part, Mr. Speaker, is the two words that I started mentioning when I started speaking about seniors; one is respect. These are the people who have built our Province. They deserve our respect. The second thing is that I as minister – none of us on this side, our Premier, and I doubt if anybody across the floor – ever wants to see seniors be argued about as they almost seem like liabilities. We should never, never get to that place.

Mr. Speaker, while we may not always agree on the things that are happening and the proposals that come forward I think all of us agree that we have to do our utmost for the seniors of our Province and as our government. From our department I can assure that will happen.

Thank you very much.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Member for Burgeo – La Poile.

MR. A. PARSONS: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I am very happy to stand and speak to this private member's resolution today moved by my colleague from Conception Bay South. It is an important topic, it is an important issue, and it is an important PMR. It is certainly a substantive one and one that we were hoping to see some support for today. It is a concept that the

Official Opposition, led by our leader, has put forward now for months that this should happen.

Let me preface my comments here today by saying that I have no doubt every single individual in this House right now, all the members of the House, care for seniors and want the best interests of seniors to be met and to be looked after. Let's make sure that is not an issue right off the top. I have no doubt every one of us.

I listened to the comments by the Member for Exploits and he is talking about getting contacted by seniors. Again I think that is something that all forty-eight of us have in common. We are contacted by members of our constituency and many times they are seniors. We do our utmost to help them, whether it is filling out forms, whether it is providing information, you name it, but what we are asking for is something different than that.

I want to provide a little bit of background. Something that we did as the Official Opposition team back in the fall was we did a series of meetings across the Province called Lets Connect. It was a chance for us as the Official Opposition to get out across the Province and meet with seniors and hear directly of their needs. More importantly, rather than listening to politicians talk, it was a chance for politicians to listen. That is what we wanted to do.

I was very lucky I started in my hometown of Port aux Basques and went to Burgeo. We were in Corner Brook, we were in Bay Roberts, we were in Winterton, Arnold's Cove, Lewisporte and we ended off actually in Southlands. The first thing I would say is we were amazed at the response that we got, just the turnout, the people showing up. You never know when you have meetings if people have any interest in showing up or being a part of it, but going by the turnout we were pretty impressed. I cannot forget Winterton. We were in Winterton. I do not want to forget the good folks there in Trinity – Bay de Verde.

Number one, they were showing up; number two, they were talking. They were telling us those issues. They were letting us know. Some of those issues happen to be very specific. Some of them, in fact, were very individual. Some

were systemic. Some were common across the Province no matter where you were.

One thing happened while we were doing this tour. The interest we had – unfortunately we did not get to the rest of the places because the House of Assembly was called back in. I know the Member for CBS, who is also the MHA responsible for Seniors, Wellness and Social Development for our team, is getting out there in the different communities. He is listening to people. We had such great success. We are going to continue doing it.

During that tour it was actually announced that the Department of Seniors, Wellness and Social Development was created. So I had people say to me: What do you think of that? I said: All I can tell you right now is that I like the idea. I will say, credit to the member aside, they put a very senior, experienced minister in the portfolio. I think they showed that they wanted someone who it was not their first portfolio. I have great respect for the member opposite, that was certainly pardon the pun.

They put an individual in who I have great respect for. I know that he cares for seniors. All I could say at the time – because I did not know the mandate, I did not know what the direction was. I said I like the idea but we have to see how it works out.

So far I have no issue with the department. I know they care about seniors. We all deal with that, the different initiatives, the different ideas. Where we disagree is we feel that there is a need for an independent voice for the seniors of this Province that is not controlled by a government, that is not controlled by politicians, and that is not controlled by depending on which party is in place.

We want an advocate who is independent, funded as the Child and Youth Advocate is, as the Citizens' Representative is. Funded, but you have that mandate and your job is to go out and represent the best interests of that constituency. Child, Youth and Family Services; we know what their mandate is. The Citizens' Representative represents all constituents. In this case, we think there is a need for an independent voice to represent seniors. That is all there is to it.

The fact is right now, at the end of day, partisan interests are in control of government departments. That is how this works, but we need independence. We need someone who is going to be there whether there is a change in government, whether there is a change in party, whether there is a change in minister, whether there is a change in bureaucrats. You need someone there who is going to speak out for seniors, speak out on specific issues or speak out on systemic issues.

Two things I would say. The Member for Exploits mentioned we as MHAs advocate for our constituents, many of whom happen to be seniors. I agree, we do advocate for seniors, but we also advocate for children, for parents, for workers, and for businesses. We advocate for constituents. We advocate for every single person in our constituency. That is our job. I think we all do that to the best of our ability. I know everybody on the other side, I know people on this side. That is what we do. That is why we want to get elected and that is why we want to do the job, but we are not specifically advocates for seniors.

We have many other hats that we wear. We have to come in here in the House. Many members on the other side are ministers. So in some cases you represent the Cabinet, the government, and that can be a conflict. We need someone, regardless of who is there, who is going to represent seniors.

The second thing I would say is they are trying to say that the Department of Seniors, Wellness and Social Development is there, therefore, that is going to take care of seniors and that is fine. The Department of Child, Youth and Family Services is there, but they still need a Child and Youth Advocate. At the end of the day you need someone independent who can advocate for a vulnerable population, someone who needs a voice to speak out on behalf of them. In that case it is children. We are saying that many seniors are vulnerable. It is a population that is growing. They need an independent voice that is going to represent them. That is what we are saying.

We look at legislation here where we talk about the Adult Protection Act and it specifically mentions vulnerable seniors who need

protection. Well now let's put someone in there who can go out there and look at systemic issues. I used the Child and Youth Advocate because that is what we know and see. As the member mentioned, there is precedent for this across the country. We are not reinventing the wheel here, we are taking best practices.

Just yesterday government talked about we need to be leaders. In this case, look, it is not about leading; it is about doing the right thing and looking to other provinces to see how something successful can be brought here. There is precedent for this. You can look at this and see how it is done.

The Child and Youth Advocate will come out and in many cases they investigate based on specific episodes that have happened. You look at the various reports that the Advocate has released talking about specific incidents, whether it is the fire on Springdale Street. In many cases they will look at this is a systemic issue within the department that is responsible for protecting them.

So we might see a case of where the department, even though they are trying to do their best, there are still issues that happen. We have seen that in CYFS where, no fault with the people trying it, but that is the whole purpose behind it. Systemic issues happen due to gaps in service. This is what is going on here.

We are saying the Department of Seniors –

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Oh, oh!

MR. SPEAKER: Order, please!

MR. A. PARSONS: We are not complaining about that. That is good. I was glad to hear the Member for St. John's Centre, number one, the fact that she and her team support this initiative, but she also mentioned too that the department is good; I applaud you for what you are doing. It is the same thing coming from us. We do not have an issue there, but why would you not want to put an individual, an independent voice there, that can truly protect seniors? Why would you not want to do that?

I know one reason they would not want to do it. The member mentioned it: cost. How are you

going to pay for it? I say, you cannot stand here in the House and talk about the seniors are important and we need to do everything we can for seniors and then in another space say, but we cannot afford to do that. You cannot do that. We are saying that it is that important that you have to make this happen. Again, there is precedent for cost. We can make this happen.

I could get into this big spiel on where could you find the money and talk about there has been money wasted in certain things on the other side whether it is the ATIPP report that cost \$1 million or Parliamentary Secretaries, but I do not want to get into that. I want to stay with the topic at hand. We announced months ago that we feel there is a need for a seniors' advocacy office funded and their job is to come out and make sure that seniors are protected.

Again, that is not going to stop MHAs from doing our job. We are going to continue to lobby for seniors. We are going to continue to worry about seniors and work for seniors. That is not going to change, but we have an independent voice there that is going to say politics aside, allegiances aside, our job is seniors and we are going to make sure they are protected. We will come out in reports saying what we think the issues are, and to make sure that steps are taken and recommendations are taken to protect that. That is what the Child and Youth Advocate does. We do not have anybody questioning the importance or the need for that. We all applaud it and say we need that; that is a good thing.

When the Department of CYFS was created, we said we need that, that is a good thing; but it is the Child and Youth Advocate that years later has said here are some of the gaps and issues in that department. Get it fixed. Now we have a newly created Department of Seniors and Wellness and if we are still seeing those issues and gaps down the road that seniors' advocate can say look – whether there was a Liberal government, a PC government, or an NDP government, they are going to say look, we do not care, fix it, and that is the purpose here.

Right now we do not have this. At the end of the day, it is controlled by partisan interest. That is what we are saying – and again, if you want to go further, we would say that the advocate itself

should be picked by the independent appointments commission to make sure the politics is taken out of it, to put the right people in place so that it is not cronies placed in these positions. That it is the right people with the right background.

Given the fact that one-quarter of our population is going to be seniors in the next decade – and you think about it, that is a huge number – we need to take steps now to make sure that population is protected. I do not care whether you live in a rural district like I do, if you live in an urban district, they have many issues which are specific and related to the area that they live. They also have commonalities, issues that stretch across this Province and affect all seniors. An advocate could ensure that these were looked at and provide guidance and advice to this government, to any government, to say this is what we need to do to make sure they are not exploited.

I think I have made my points clear. I do not think there is a need to be repetitive. What I would say is every time you stand up and talk about how important seniors are, do not stand up and say we are not going to do the right thing for seniors because it is going to cost too much. You cannot do that. I would ask that you please consider this.

Please support this resolution because we think it is the right step. We think it is an important step, and one that hopefully all parties can get behind and support.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. SPEAKER: If the hon. Member for Conception Bay South speaks, it will close debate.

The hon. the Member for Conception Bay South.

MR. HILLIER: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

It is my pleasure to speak last on this debate and bring it to some closure. I would like to be able to say ditto to what the Member for Burgeo – La Poile said and then sit down because he did a fabulous job of summing up.

As we have gone through this afternoon, I made a few notes. I just want to go back over some of the things that were said here and maybe clarify a few items. I thank all of those people who took part in the debate this afternoon. It has been a great exchange. I think it will do well for seniors in the Province.

I recognize the Member for Fortune Bay – Cape La Hune who spoke very positively for seniors, as do most of us – or not most of us, Sir, all of us speak very positively about seniors and our concerns for seniors in our communities. She talked about the work she does as an MHA. Obviously, we all do that same work as an MHA.

She points out other groups that help seniors, but, Mr. Speaker, one of the concerns about other groups that help seniors – and I know the 50 Plus Clubs have been mentioned here a fair bit this afternoon – is that they are all dependent on volunteers. If they disappear, all that support is not there that we are assuming would be there for seniors.

She also referenced the Adult Protection Act as a service for seniors. There is no doubt that it does cover seniors, but it also covers many more people within the Province and it is not specific to seniors. Mr. Speaker, the Adult Protection Act gives a director the legislative authority to intervene on behalf of adults incapable of caring for themselves. A seniors' advocate, on the other hand, would focus specifically on seniors and give legislative authority to an independent voice in government on the rights and interests of all seniors, not just those requiring protection and intervention.

While the seniors' advocate may investigate an individual case, the advocate will also be legislated to identify systemic issues, which my colleague for Burgeo – La Poile referenced a few moments ago. Then, Mr. Speaker, my colleague for Virginia Waters very eloquently discussed the philosophy of the seniors' advocate and why the seniors' advocate is such a concern for us. Then she went into significant detail, I guess, on the most current issue that we feel would fall within the purview of a seniors' advocate, that is this whole issue of pension clawback and the impact that it will have on many of our seniors in paying it back.

One thing that she points out in terms of the advocate that we propose is that this person would be independent of government and answering only to the House of Assembly – not an appointment, not a political appointment, and I guess the concern is the perception of bias. I am not suggesting bias, but the perception of bias. This needs to be open and clear, and an independent advocate would ensure that that took place.

I thank the Member for Exploits for his commentary. Again, there is lots of support out there for seniors; but going back to the fact that a lot of these organizations are volunteer organization is government saying that they are depending on volunteers to make sure that seniors get the support that they need? Sure, volunteers play a major role in a lot of the aspects in our communities, one being with seniors – and I guess the Member for St. John's Centre referenced it. With seniors' groups, you have two groups of seniors. You have those within a seniors' group who are doing great things for the community, but one of the great things that they are doing for the community is supporting other seniors who are in those groups.

Mr. Speaker, I could still go back to the fact that these are volunteer groups. Is that where we need to be putting the support for seniors, on the backs of volunteers?

I thank the Member for St. John's Centre for her support of our motion. Just one correction, I guess, and that is that we called for this seniors' advocate back in October. It is just a correction. I am sure you did in December, but we did in October as well.

The one area that –

MS ROGERS: (Inaudible).

MR. HILLIER: All right, let's see.

There is one item she did mention that resonates with me in my district and that is housing for seniors. So many people, so many seniors, Mr. Speaker, are concerned about on one hand affordable housing, but on the other hand being stuck as individual seniors in the family home. Having to look after the family home as an

individual, the cost of looking after the family home, the cost of maintenance of that family home, simple things like mowing the grass and shoveling the snow.

I know in my district it is an issue with seniors that – I picture one lady right now, Rex, I have to get out of my home because it is too big for me, but there is nowhere to go. In the meantime I know there are three housing initiatives within the town, three housing cottage groups, I believe, of ten or eleven, but they are all full. I know she said to me last time we were in church, Minister, I had my cottage all decorated and now I find out that the person who was trying to put the proposal through did not get the funding. So she is back for another year, another winter, or what have you, back in the family home.

Mr. Speaker, the Minister of Seniors and Wellness again spoke very passionately about seniors in general. I know this has been a very civil debate this evening, but one comment he made was that seniors have access to enough. My concern is that enough, while there are a lot of services out there for seniors, they do not cover I guess two characteristics; one is that they are legislated and they are independent of government. The enough that seniors have are either one or the other. They are independent of government in that they are volunteer groups. So they are either independent of government – those that are independent of government are volunteer groups, or they are legislated. If they are legislated, it is part of government.

What we are suggesting is an entity that is both independent and legislated. Right now, that exists in the form of a Child and Youth Advocate and a citizens' advocate.

Mr. Speaker, my colleague for Burgeo – La Poile, as always, when he stands to speak, is very eloquent in his presentation. We are not prepared as a party to sit still and accept what we have. We saw the Throne Speech come down yesterday. We were told so many times we are going to continue to do this, this is what we have done, and so on. We are not prepared to sit still and function in that manner.

As we just debated a little bit, in October we said that within one year of taking office, the

Liberal Party would institute a seniors' advocacy office. Mr. Speaker, we are now moving up that timeline and calling for a seniors' advocacy office today in this debate.

To sum things up, and a similar summary that I mentioned in my earlier speech, we simply urge government to establish a seniors' advocacy office. We have identified a need for it. We have set out the role of such an office. We have identified precedence in other parts of the country. We have identified similar offices in our Province. Mr. Speaker, we have identified cases where a senior's advocate would have undoubtedly gotten involved. We now need the support from the remainder of this House to bring it to reality.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. SPEAKER (Verge): Order, please!

It is the pleasure of the House to adopt the motion?

All those in favour, 'aye.'

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Aye.

MR. SPEAKER: All those against, 'nay.'

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Nay.

MR. SPEAKER: The motion is defeated.

AN HON. MEMBER: Division.

MR. SPEAKER: Division has been called.

Summon the members.

Division

MR. SPEAKER: Order, please!

All those in favour of the motion, please stand.

CLERK: Mr. Ball, Mr. Andrew Parsons, Mr. Osborne, Mr. Joyce, Ms Cathy Bennett, Mr. Jim Bennett, Mr. Slade, Mr. Mitchelmore, Ms Dempster, Mr. Edmunds, Mr. Kirby, Mr. Lane,

Mr. Hillier, Mr. Flynn, Mr. Crocker, Ms Michael, Mr. Murphy, Ms Rogers.

MR. SPEAKER: All those against the motion, please stand.

CLERK: Mr. King, Mr. Hutchings, Mr. Kent, Mr. Dalley, Mr. Crummell, Mr. Sandy Collins, Mr. Felix Collins, Mr. Jackman, Mr. Granter, Mr. Littlejohn, Mr. Cross, Ms Perry, Mr. Brazil, Mr. Russell, Mr. Forsey, Mr. Hunter, Mr. Dinn, Mr. Cornect, Mr. Hedderson, Mr. Kevin Parsons, Mr. Little, Mr. Pollard, Mr. Peach, Mr. McGrath.

MR. SPEAKER: Order, please!

CLERK: Mr. Speaker, the ayes, eighteen, the nays, twenty-four.

MR. SPEAKER: The motion is defeated.

This being Wednesday, Private Members' Day, the business of the House concluded, the House now stands adjourned until tomorrow, Thursday, at 1:30 o'clock.