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Speaker: Honourable Tom Osborne, MHA

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The House met at 1:30 p.m.

MR. SPEAKER (Osborne): Order, please!

Admit strangers.

Today I would like to welcome to the Speaker's gallery a personal friend of Mr. Terry Fox, Donna Ball.

Welcome.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. SPEAKER: As well, in the public gallery today we have His Worship, Mayor Daniel Veilleux of the Town of Lushes Bight-Beaumont-Beaumont North. That's on Long Island in the District of Baie Verte – Green Bay.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. SPEAKER: On Thursday last week I had informed the House that Raylene was moving on. We have a new Page today, Sabrina Andrews. Sabrina is a third-year political science student at Memorial University. She's from Grand Falls-Windsor.

Welcome.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

Statements by Members

MR. SPEAKER: For Members' statements today we have the Members for the District of Labrador West, St. John's East – Quidi Vidi, Harbour Main, Cape St. Francis, Harbour Grace – Port de Grave and Fortune Bay – Cape La Hune.

The hon. the Member for Labrador West.

MR. LETTO: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I rise today in this hon. House to recognize an athlete extraordinaire – Dana Martin Kelly of Wabush.

Dana has participated in seven national and international marathons, including the Canadian Arthritis Society's Joints in Motion in Switzerland; the Disney Dopey Challenge;

Jamaica Reggae Marathon; the Goose Bay Trapline Marathon; the Montreal Rock n' Roll Marathon; and, most recently, ran the New York City Marathon in November, 2015 in the time of three hours and 25 minutes and the Boston Marathon just a few weeks ago in three hours and 43 minutes.

Because of her athletic achievements both at home and abroad, Dana was recognized as the Labrador West Senior Female Athlete of the Year and a recipient of the Town of Wabush Outstanding Achievement Award.

Bodybuilding is another passion for Dana, finishing third at the NLABBA bodybuilding event in St. John's in November. In June, she will be competing in the Figure Short and Grand Masters Figure categories in Moncton at the CBBF World Qualifiers.

Dana wears her Labrador colours very proudly and is always happy to represent Labrador on the world stage. Her motto: Do what you love, love what you do.

I ask all hon. Members to join me in congratulating Dana on her athletic achievements.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

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

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

This is Multiple Sclerosis Awareness Month. The MS Society of Canada funds research for an eventual cure, and works hard to enable people affected by MS to enhance their quality of life.

In Newfoundland and Labrador, the work is done by volunteers. Powerhouse volunteer Zita Kavanagh-Taylor has chaired the NL MS Avalon Chapter since 2011. She created Paws for MS, the only dog walk for MS in Atlantic Canada, three years ago, leads a monthly support group and does phone support for MS patients in rural areas.

The NL MS Avalon Chapter, as the only active chapter of the society in the province, makes contact with and sends information to MS patients everywhere in the province. As Zita Kavanagh-Taylor says, “No one has to go through MS alone. We are here for everyone.”

The chapter hosts education sessions, fundraisers and social events for MS patients and their families.

Zita Kavanagh-Taylor and the volunteers of the NL MS Avalon Chapter are dedicated to finding a cure for multiple sclerosis and enabling people affected with MS to enhance their quality of life.

I ask all hon. Members to join me in acknowledging the good work they do.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Member for Harbour Main.

MS. PARSLEY: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I rise in this hon. House today to celebrate the accomplishments of Jeremy Lewis, a student at Roncalli Central High in Avondale. Jeremy received the Young Citizens Award at the Heritage Fair held earlier this year.

Jeremy’s Heritage Fair project was called Root Cellaring, a look at some of the rural food storage methods used throughout our history. For his winning project, Jeremy built an impressive root cellar filled with vegetables. He demonstrated for the judges his extensive knowledge of root cellars in this province. For this, the judges also awarded him the Heritage Foundation of Newfoundland and Labrador Built Heritage Award.

The Heritage Fair has been held since 1997, with the goal of fostering a greater sense of history and place among young people in our province’s schools. This year’s theme was Service and Sacrifice: Shaping our Culture.

Nine participants from the Avalon Heritage Fair will participate in a Trail of the Caribou tour of the First World War battlefields in France and Belgium this July as part of the Ambassador Program launched in 2015.

I ask all Members of this hon. House to join me in congratulating this year’s participants.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Member for Cape St. Francis.

MR. K. PARSONS: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

I stand in this hon. House today to recognize a group of grade six students from Holy Trinity Elementary in Torbay. I had the pleasure to attend, as a judge, at their public speak off, along with Colleen Tapper, a school council member, and Ms. Charlotte Barrington, former principal of Holy Trinity Elementary.

The ten finalists in the speak off were: Mackenzie Parrell, No More Homework, Please; Halle Fleming, Keep Torbay Library; Gabe Brown, The Benefits of Hockey; Jack Waterman, Keep the Seal Hunt; Emily Mahon, Learn a Second Language; Brianna Squires, Why Smoking Should Be Banned; Chantelle Peyton, Rid the World of Joseph Kony; Andrew Gosse, Why all Pre-Teens Should Have a Cellphone; Perry Cahill, Don’t Drink Pop; and Matthew O’Driscoll, Kids Should Play Minecraft.

It was a very difficult contest to judge. They were all very good. Perry Cahill took first place. Second place went to Gabe Brown and Jack Waterman taking third. Standing up in front of your fellow students and family is not easy. They did a fantastic job.

I ask all hon. Members to join with me in extending my congratulations to the grade six students at Holy Trinity Elementary.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Member for Harbour Grace – Port de Grave.

MS. P. PARSONS: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I am excited to stand here today to recognize an outstanding citizen and friend, Gary Bishop of

Coley's Point. Gary is 35 years old and attends more community events in the Town of Bay Roberts than anyone.

He has completed secondary school and enjoys keeping up with politics. When he's not busy with civic events, he's keeping a close eye on the House of Assembly and Parliament. Gary lives with a disability which is classified as global delay which encompasses physical and intellectual challenges, but this condition does not hold him back.

He's been involved in Special Olympics for over 20 years, and is one of the original members. He's a top-notch bowling champ and has been the lead fundraiser for the club for the past two consecutive years. During spring and summer, you'll see him zipping around town in his motorized wheelchair collecting pledges for the annual law enforcement Torch Run. It is dedication and contribution like Gary's which helps enable the club to provide local sports programming.

I am sure we'll soon see him travelling around town during winter months, if he manages to find snow tires for his wheelchair.

Colleagues, please join me in honouring Gary Bishop of Coley's Point.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

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

MS. PERRY: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I rise in this hon. House to thank Mr. Frank Collier for 37 years of dedicated service to the St. Alban's Volunteer Fire and Rescue Department, with 12 years serving as Fire Chief.

Mr. Collier's professionalism and commitment to his community is very much appreciated. On behalf of residents, I would like to extend him a sincere thank you and wish him the best of luck in his retirement.

Over all the years, Frank has been a model of strong community spirit, hard work, and an excellent example of selfless service to others that will serve the members of the Volunteer

Fire Department in great stead. Frank's volunteerism and fundraising efforts also aided tremendously in the great success of their annual telethon, which are essential in acquiring the funds necessary to purchase equipment and to ensure the communities' and firefighters' safety.

I ask all hon. Members to join me in congratulating Mr. Collier for his years of outstanding dedication and protecting our residents' safety. True to his character, he remains a steadfast supporter of volunteer work in the community. We are very grateful to him for always lending his talent as a musician to local fundraising events, particularly for the fire department.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

The Commemoration of the First World War and the Battle of Beaumont-Hamel

MR. SPEAKER: For Honour 100, today we have the Member for the District of Harbour Grace – Port de Grave.

MS. P. PARSONS: I will now read into the record the following 40 names of those who lost their lives in the First World War in the Royal Newfoundland Regiment, the Royal Newfoundland Naval Reserve, or the Newfoundland Mercantile Marine. This will be followed by a moment of silence.

Lest we forget: James John Maher, Leo Joseph Maher, Arthur E. W. Maidment, Robert Lewis Maidment, John Thomas Major, Augustine J. Manning, Michael Mansfield, Alfred Manuel, Samuel Manuel, Chesley Marks, Levi Marks, Joseph Marsh, Walter Marsh, William L. Marsh, Alexander Martin, Eric Shannon Martin, Henley Arthur Martin, James J. Martin, Richard B. Martin, Stephen Martin, Stephen A. Martin, Sylvester Martin, William John Martin, Joseph Martret, William Masters, John May, Charles McCarthy, Bernard McDonald, Michael P. McDonald, Walter G. McDonald, Joseph McGrath, Ronald B. McGrath, Thomas White McGrath, William McGrath, Patrick John McKay, William McKenzie, Scobie McKie, James McLaughlin, Clem McManus, Donald Fraser McNeil.

(Moment of silence.)

MR. SPEAKER: Please be seated.

Statements by Ministers.

Statements by Ministers

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Minister Responsible for Fire and Emergency Services.

MR. JOYCE: Mr. Speaker, I rise to recognize an important partnership among the Newfoundland and Labrador Association of Fire Services, the Lions Clubs and the Autism Society of Newfoundland and Labrador. They are providing first responders with the training they need to recognize and assist individuals with autism in an emergency situation.

First responders must be ready for any type of emergency at a moment's notice. That is why the Autism Society developed a training session to help first responders better understand the complex needs of people with autism who are involved in an emergency. In such cases, one response may not fit all.

After receiving the training, the Association of Fire Services recognized the need to make it available to its membership province-wide – and to others that might benefit. Since the association has been involved, the demand for the training has doubled and is growing daily.

Mr. Speaker, training has already taken place on the Northern Peninsula, and the Autism Society's training team delivered three sessions in the western region last week. There are plans to deliver training elsewhere on the Island and in Labrador.

I ask my colleagues in this House to join me in recognizing the leadership of the Association of Fire Services, the Autism Society and the Lions Clubs, in providing these important training opportunities. I encourage others who see value in this training to contact the Autism Society to see what opportunities may be available.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Member for Mount Pearl North.

MR. KENT: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I thank the minister for the advance copy of his statement today. We, too, join with government in recognizing and congratulating the Association of Fire Services, the Autism Society, and the province's Lions Clubs for this fantastic training program.

The Autism Society in Newfoundland and Labrador strives for a province where people with autism and their families are respected, and where they receive services and supports based on their individualized differences, needs and preferences. This new training program for first responders will help create some of those additional and specialized supports for individuals with autism in emergency situations should they arise.

I'm glad to hear the training has commenced and it will eventually be offered throughout all areas of Newfoundland and Labrador. This is a great example of how community groups can work together to deliver creative and useful programming.

Thank you.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

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

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

I thank the minister for the advance copy of his statement. This partnership is good news. Training which helps our first responders prepare to provide emergency services to members of the public in need is essential. If only government was as forward looking as the associations the minister is applauding today.

The Autism Society and parents of children with autism have been asking government for years for more supportive training and programs for children and adults with autism but have yet to see the changes they need.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Minister of Justice and Attorney General.

MR. A. PARSONS: Mr. Speaker, it is with tremendous pride that I rise today to welcome a wonderful friend to Newfoundland and Labrador, and to the district I represent, Burgeo – La Poile.

Terry Fox's brother, Fred Fox, is in the province to spend a week visiting school children and thanking residents for their continued support of Terry's cancer research achievements.

When Terry Fox began his journey in St. John's on a cold, wet April morning in 1980, he dreamed of raising \$1 million.

After the first 25 days and with growing encouragement from residents along the way, Terry stopped in Channel-Port aux Basques where that town alone raised \$10,000.

Mr. Speaker, the generous response from people in Port aux Basques fired his imagination and a new fundraising goal was set. Terry is known to have asked, "If they can raise a dollar for every citizen, why can't we raise a dollar for every Canadian?"

Today, Terry's great wish for people to realize how "dreams are made possible if you try" is more alive than ever with more than \$650 million having been raised worldwide in his name.

His legacy is so significant that our government anticipates bringing forward a private Member's motion during this sitting of the House of Assembly to formally proclaim the second Sunday after Labour Day each year as Terry Fox Day.

I ask my fellow Members to please join me in welcoming Mr. Fred Fox back to Newfoundland and Labrador where Terry Fox began his Marathon of Hope – and where an amazing donation by an incredible community helped Terry realize his goal and gave his dream a momentum that endures.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

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

MR. P. DAVIS: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I thank the minister for the advance copy of his statement today. We join the government in welcoming Mr. Fred Fox back to our province and also Terry's friend, Donna, as well today.

As we all know, Terry Fox has touched this province and our country in a most profound way. It was mentioned by the minister since its inception, the Terry Fox Foundation has raised over \$650 million for cancer research. Continuing research has created new treatments, new processes, new drugs and new opportunities for those who have been afflicted by cancer.

We're thankful for Terry and his gift for us, and we're also very thankful for the continuing legacy and the positive impact on people around the world.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

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

MS. ROGERS: Mr. Speaker, I thank the minister for an advance copy of his statement. I remember that cold, wet morning. It was pretty desolate down there. My father was a commissionaire at the old fishery building at the harbour. Dad was working that morning and met Terry, and that night he told me about this young guy who was going to run across the country and only had one leg. Dad said: Geraldine, you never know what the human spirit can do.

Thank you, Terry, for your dream, for all you have done to advance cancer research and instilling hope and defiance. And thank you to the Fox family; you never know what the human spirit can do.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. SPEAKER: Further statements by ministers?

Oral Questions.

Oral Questions

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

MR. P. DAVIS: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, in the budget this year government made choices. Those choices included cuts to health care delivery in Labrador by about \$850,000. Now we've learned in recent days that government is spending almost the same amount – \$750,000 – to hire a consultant to do another study on the likelihood of building a tunnel to connect Labrador with the Island.

I ask the Premier: While you're cutting health care to Labradorians, how can you justify such a study?

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Premier.

PREMIER BALL: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Well, the former premier is indeed right. There were some difficult choices that were made in budget 2016-2017. As a result of that and when you look at opportunities to actually replace revenue in our province, you need to explore what options you have available to us.

The fixed link, I would say to the former premier, is just not about Labrador – although Labrador residents would see a substantial benefit, if indeed a project like this could occur. There are benefits here for all of Newfoundland and Labrador. When we look at the transportation system within our province, having a fixed link in place would mean you had more certainty in the transportation system without delay, and it would bring a huge amount of economic activity just in the social and the economic benefits that such a link – if indeed it can happen in our province.

Before you make decisions on long-term commitments you have to make to things like

ferry services, having this information is critical to that decision.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

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

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. P. DAVIS: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

AN HON. MEMBER: (Inaudible.)

MR. SPEAKER: Order, please!

The hon. the Leader of the Opposition.

MR. P. DAVIS: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

People who earn between \$25,000 and \$36,000 a year will pay \$300 for the Liberal levy. Now, that means about 2,500 of them – almost the same number of people who visited the front of the Confederation Building here on Saturday – will be paying for the study for a fixed link between Labrador and the Island of Newfoundland.

I ask the Premier: What's your justification for taxing people to pay for yet another study when you've made a commitment to reduce hiring consultants for the province?

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Premier.

PREMIER BALL: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

First of all, I would just like to remind the former premier the information he just mentioned there about paying \$300 for a levy for someone between \$20,000 and \$30,000 or \$35,000, whatever he just mentioned there, is actually not the case. Someone, as an example, at \$21,000 – it is taxable income. It's not total income. Someone at \$21,000 of taxable income would actually pay \$60, I say to the former premier. We need to get those facts out here.

We've put in place a very substantive Income Supplement program to help people on low income and those with disability and our seniors.

I remind the former premier, if you want to consider the facts, make sure you put them all out here.

The fixed link in Newfoundland and Labrador would be a big social and economic driver to the future of our province. Making this investment so you can make a decision on how you supply services to Labrador and the services to our province is critical at this time.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

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

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. P. DAVIS: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

That means an even higher number of hard-working, low-income and middle-income families will be paying for the study on the fixed link, Mr. Speaker. That's what –

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Oh, oh!

MR. SPEAKER: Order, please!

I'm resetting the clock for the hon. the Leader of the Opposition.

MR. P. DAVIS: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

That means, based on what the Premier –

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Oh, oh!

MR. SPEAKER: Order, please!

The hon. the Leader of the Opposition.

MR. P. DAVIS: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

That means based on what the Premier just said a much higher number of hard-working, low-income Newfoundlanders and Labradorians will be contributing to this consultation process to hiring a consultant to do this study; a study that has already been done.

I ask the Premier: While you're doing a study, is the province in a position to pay for a fixed link today, if the study came back and said it's going

to cost \$2 billion or \$3 billion or \$4 billion? Are you even in a position to consider paying for a link today?

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Premier.

PREMIER BALL: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The evidence is quite clear where the former premier stands. It was his administration who actually took the RFP for the updated ferry system off the Straits and in the North Coast of Labrador. So it's very clear where he stands in supplying services to people in Labrador.

Mr. Speaker, when you look at economic diversification within our province, having certainty around a transportation system, a fixed link, is something we need to be able to answer. How could you ever make a commitment in terms of a ferry for the next 20-25 years in our province without having the one question that everyone that I would speak with in Labrador, they want answered – is a fixed link available for the next generation of Labradorians, for the next generation of Newfoundlanders? It's a question that deserves to be answered. It would have an economic impact and a social impact on Newfoundland and Labrador.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

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

MR. P. DAVIS: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I wonder what the people in Labrador are thinking about when they're cutting health care to Labradorians. That's what we've heard from people over the last few days, is that they're cutting health care to Labradorians. People who live in remote and small populations which have great expense to achieve health care and to obtain health care, and the cost is going to get higher for them now, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, while the Justice Minister declined comment when he was asked by the media, perhaps the Premier can let the people of the province know his intentions regarding the

\$32,000 recommended pay increase for provincial court judges?

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Minister of Justice and Attorney General.

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

I am certainly happy to stand here and speak to the recommendations made by the Wicks tribunal, which, as most people should know, was submitted to my office in December; a resolution tabled in this House in March; and we have 30 sitting days of the House in which to propose the resolution on whether we accept, reject or change the recommendations made by the tribunal.

Now, everybody should know that this is an independent process that's done, and we talk about judicial independence. Certainly we have some serious concerns about the tribunal's recommendations but, again, we will be factoring everything in, looking at what's going on in other provinces as well, and we'll certainly be tabling that resolution for debate by all Members in this House before June 1.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

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

MR. P. DAVIS: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Well, the budget is top of mind for people in the province today.

So I'll ask the Premier this: Does your budget include an amount that would budget the increased pay that's been recommended by this report? Is that included in your budget? Is there retroactive pay included in the budget? How are you going to pay for this?

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Minister of Justice and Attorney General.

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

Again, we are standing here speaking to the recommendations made by an independent

tribunal. I know there is obviously serious concern out there, people hearing this and wondering about it. And sure, the Leader of the Official Opposition has expressed his concern, but what I find interesting is that the work that was done in this tribunal and the submission was made was actually done in May of 2015.

So my question for the Leader of the Official Opposition is: If you were so concerned, why did you offer a 5 per cent raise back in May of 2015?

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

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

MR. P. DAVIS: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Oh, oh!

MR. SPEAKER: Order, please!

The hon. the Leader of the Opposition.

MR. P. DAVIS: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

The question was have they budgeted this year for this increase? The minister hasn't answered it. If they've budgeted for it they've made a decision to give the increase. If you haven't budgeted for it, the question would be then how are they going to pay for that.

So minister, maybe you can try again: Have you budgeted for this increase? If you haven't and the increase is passed by the House, how do you intend to pay for it?

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

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

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

I'm happy to stand here and speak to these recommendations, which the hearings were held back in May of 2015. We obviously have a concern here. This is something that's done by an independent tribunal, as has been done in the

past. Again, depending on the resolution that's put forward here – and I will express the fact that we have serious concerns about the tribunal's recommendations and we'll put forward a resolution knowing full well, though, that we have to take everything very seriously.

Again, I say to the Member opposite, he's very concerned now but it was his government that provided a 27 per cent increase in judicial salaries over the last 10 years, not including the 5 per cent raise that he recommended in May.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Member for Conception Bay East – Bell Island.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. BRAZIL: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, we know that the intensive core French program for grade six students will be reduced in many schools: Mary Queen of Peace, Holy Trinity, Beachy Cove and others.

I ask the minister: What do you say to children who won't be able to participate in the intensive core French program in September because of your budget choices?

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development.

MR. KIRBY: Mr. Speaker, according to the *Schools Act* in this province, we have a responsibility for ensuring that students have all of the courses that are needed by them to meet graduation requirements. Intensive core French is an optional program; an optional program that I would say that many of the Members in the House of Assembly, many of the students in their districts have no access to at all. It's not a program that's universally offered in Newfoundland and Labrador.

As a result of the budget this year, the English School District has decided that they will no longer be providing partial teacher allocations

for part classes of the optional intensive core French program.

Thank you.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Member for Conception Bay East – Bell Island.

MR. BRAZIL: So the minister doesn't see the value of core French, and it's his decisions that have forced administrators into that corner where they had to make decisions around the quality of education.

What do you say to families of Vanier and other schools whose music and gym programs will be reduced because of your budget choices? Are parents' concerns the nonsense you've spoken about?

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development.

MR. KIRBY: Mr. Speaker, What I've said to parents who've contacted me is that the English School District will no longer be providing a full teacher allocation for partial classes of the optional intensive core French program.

The optional intensive core French program is not accessed by many of the children in Newfoundland and Labrador represented by Members in the House of Assembly here. It is an optional program that is not part of the core graduation requirement.

MR. K. PARSONS: (Inaudible).

MR. SPEAKER: Order, please!

MR. KIRBY: If the Member for Cape St. Francis doesn't want to hear the answer than don't ask the questions, I suggest.

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Member for Conception Bay East – Bell Island.

MR. BRAZIL: Mr. Speaker, from what I understand from the minister, because we can't offer the program to everybody, nobody should

have it. That's the intent of the minister over there. That's how he views education.

What do you say about the fact that upwards of 32 elementary children may be in an elementary classroom in September? Are these concerns of parents nonsense also?

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development.

MR. KIRBY: Mr. Speaker, I see no evidence of what the Member is speaking at all. Nothing has come across my desk to indicate that there are that many students going to be in a class.

This year, the class-size cap for kindergarten is staying as it was – 20 students. The class-size cap for multigrading for combined grades is staying as it was, 18. The class-size cap is not changing for grades one to three either. That is to protect those early years of education where it's most important for young children to have a smaller ratio where major concepts are learned.

I don't know where the Member would get all of what he just said out of that.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Opposition House Leader.

MR. HUTCHINGS: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

In excess of 2,000 teachers, nurses, students and concerned citizens converged on Confederation Building this past Saturday. As we know, Premier Ball has campaigned on a promise of listening. If you can't listen, you can't lead.

Will you now take the concerned citizens up on their offer to hit reset on this budget and really consult with them to make better choices and finally start listening?

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Premier.

PREMIER BALL: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

As you know, prior to the budget we did a series of government renewal initiatives across the

province where we had many submissions that were made by Newfoundlanders and Labradorians. Many of the decisions that you've seen in this year's budget were as a result of that initiative, and we will continue to listen to Newfoundlanders and Labradorians.

I just wish that the Member opposite had done some listening to Newfoundlanders and Labradorians for the last 10 years then we would not have been in this situation with \$25 billion of oil royalties and \$4 million in tax decreases in 2007 to the wealthiest in our province. That is who you listened to. You decreased their taxes back then. As a result of that, we are left to clean up the mess that you have left us with and the mess that Newfoundlanders and Labradorians now have to deal with.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. SPEAKER: The Opposition House Leader.

MR. HUTCHINGS: Mr. Speaker, I say to the hon. Premier, we did lay out plans for people and we did listen. We were out in front and we were able to explain what the budgets were in the past. Unlike this government right now, the Minister of Finance and the Premier, no one knows out there. No one knows what the budget is all about. They can't explain it. It's everybody else's problem. It's the media's problem. It's the Opposition's problem. They can't even explain their own budget.

I say to the Premier to think about that and get out and let people know what's going on in Newfoundland and Labrador.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. HUTCHINGS: People are saying they're listening. They have stated that people don't understand the budget, as I've just said. In fact, they blamed everyone in the province except them, that they don't know how to explain the budget.

I ask the Minister of Finance: What is your plan to address the thousands of people who are protesting and looking for change in your budget? When will you start listening and when will you try to make them understand what

you're doing with this particular budget that's devastating Newfoundland and Labrador?

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Premier.

PREMIER BALL: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I'm glad the former minister actually talked about the plan that they laid out to Newfoundlanders and Labradorians last April in our province because in less than one year, Mr. Speaker, the plan that they laid out missed their mark by three times the amount. They predicted last year that it would be less than \$900,000. In actual fact, it was \$2.7 billion.

In the last 66 years, \$12.5 billion in debt. That would have doubled in the next five years under your plan. It wasn't affordable. You didn't tell Newfoundlanders and Labradorians. We were at a situation with debt servicing outpacing education. That is your plan for Newfoundland and Labrador.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. SPEAKER: Order, please!

The level of noise in the Legislature during questions and answers is getting to an unacceptable level. I ask the Member in particular for Conception Bay South to be respectful.

The hon. the Opposition House Leader.

MR. HUTCHINGS: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I'll tell you what we didn't do. The hon. Premier last year cancelled the HST, which cost the people of the province \$80 million to \$100 million. That's in excess of what the Liberal levy is going to charge. That's certainly about making good decisions. That's certainly about being in touch with Newfoundlanders and Labradorians, I say. Terrible!

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. HUTCHINGS: Mr. Speaker, recently the Finance Minister in a CBC interview was asked why she didn't choose a junk food tax as

opposed to taxing books. She claimed the administration of cost to implement the junk tax was too much.

I ask the minister: If you found a way to administer tax on books, can you clarify why a junk food tax couldn't be administered as well?

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

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

MS. C. BENNETT: Mr. Speaker, the taxes that were changed as part of this year's budget were focused on taxes that we could collect through the mechanisms that are already in place. As the Members opposite would know, Canada Revenue Agency provides those services to provinces throughout the country and personal income tax, as well as the temporary levy, as well as federal taxes are all collected through CRA. It is the intention of this government to make sure that when we implement things that we do so in a very efficient way. Certainly using an existing mechanism like CRA provides a very efficient model for collecting tax, Mr. Speaker.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Member for Cape St. Francis.

MR. K. PARSONS: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

Municipal leaders are clear and unified on their displeasure with this Liberal budget. Municipal operating costs will increase due to gas tax increases, insurance, snow clearing – just to name a few. None of these increased costs are covered in their existing budgets.

So I ask the minister: How will you help municipalities to address these rising costs, and where do you expect them to get the money?

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Minister of Municipal Affairs.

MR. JOYCE: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

My earlier discussions with MNL, they asked for several things in the budget. One was to keep the cost-shared ratio the same, the second one was to ensure that the MOGs didn't change, and third was to increase the amount of funding for municipalities for water and sewer special services in the districts. Everything was provided that MNL asked for in the budget.

The president, Karen Oldford, was out publicly supporting the budget. I just find it ironic, Mr. Speaker, that the Member opposite is here asking questions about the budget when he stood himself in the House and was so pleased what this government has provided to the services for Municipalities Newfoundland and Labrador – for all the municipalities in the province. So I just find it strange he's asking questions – last week he was out supporting the budget.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Member for Cape St. Francis.

MR. K. PARSONS: Thank you very much, but, Mr. Speaker, the minister did brag. He said this Liberal budget, that MNL will be happy. But I don't know if his saw the news release this weekend from MNL. They're not very happy.

Also, he said they would be very thankful, but the Minister of Education says the libraries should be downloaded to municipalities. Municipalities feel that this is just the beginning. They say they had no consultations.

So I ask the minister: How many more services will be downloaded to communities, and where does he expect them to pay for it?

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Minister of Municipal Affairs.

MR. JOYCE: Once again, Mr. Speaker, I stand and I have to correct the premise of the statement. There is no one on this side of the government –

MR. HUTCHINGS: Just answer the question.

MR. JOYCE: Here's the former minister saying answer the question. He's the same minister who wouldn't sign the \$34.9 million fund from the federal government. So you can keep talking – you keep talking. You should at least do your duty as the minister –

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Oh, oh!

MR. SPEAKER: Order, please!

MR. JOYCE: Mr. Speaker, the premise is false. There is no one on this side of the government – and I'm the minister who is going to be dealing with municipalities – has said you have to take over the libraries. That is absolutely, categorical, positively false, and the Member knows that's false.

What we said we would do, there are 24 libraries in municipalities, we would work with the municipalities to see who would take them over, what we can do to help sustain the libraries. That is the premise of the argument that we will work with municipalities.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Member for Cape St. Francis.

MR. K. PARSONS: (Inaudible) an understanding that you're going to give the municipalities the monies to keep the libraries open. Thank you very much, I really appreciate that, and I know the municipalities do appreciate it.

The news released by MNL about the decisions that government have made said it's going to throw small communities in chaos. Community leaders have suggested that the bulk would be passed off to councils to deal with. And that's their release. They're not very happy.

I ask the minister: What did you say to the municipal leaders, and have you consulted with them because they said you haven't?

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Minister of Municipal Affairs.

MR. JOYCE: Mr. Speaker, once again I say to the Member, you're an hon. Member, but don't stand in this House and say I said I'm going to give money to municipalities. That's not what I said. You should not be saying things that are not true in this House of Assembly. You shouldn't be saying it. It's just absolutely – Hansard will show that I did not say that. I said I will work with municipalities.

Mr. Speaker, I'll say one thing, when we were in the lockup, before the lockup, when we sat down with Municipalities Newfoundland and Labrador they were very pleased. They were exceptionally pleased. In actual fact, they were shocked that the items that I mentioned, the MOG, the cost-shared, forget about the \$340 million capital works that is going to be spent, combined with the federal government going to be spent, forget about the over \$500 million infrastructure money that is going to be spent in the province – they were very pleased with it, Mr. Speaker.

I will continue to work with all municipalities in Newfoundland and Labrador and if the Member is going to make a statement, make sure it's correct, please.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Member for Mount Pearl North.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. KENT: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

We understand in Newfoundland and Labrador that 18 forest fires have been reported in the first week of forest fire season which began May 1.

I ask the minister: Have the full complement of forest firefighters been called back to work as is normal for this time of year?

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Minister of Business, Tourism, Culture and Rural Development.

MR. MITCHELMORE: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Forestry and Agrifoods Agency has a complement of permanent staff which deals with the forest incident management and forest fires. We certainly will be calling back and have all of our staff ready to call back on May 16, but we have called back an RFP early for defensive firefighters to be involved and get the appropriate training. But we do have the equipment and staff on the ground to deal with our forest fires and we did put out a precautionary release.

So we are well equipped, we do have our staff, and this is the normal protocol and procedure.

Thank you.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Member for Mount Pearl North.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. KENT: Mr. Speaker, it's not a normal protocol and procedure. Normally in this province our forest firefighters are called back to work on May 1. The minister just acknowledged that this year it's May 16.

I ask him: Why is that? Why is there a delay this year in calling back much-needed forest firefighters?

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. SPEAKER: The Minister Responsible for the Forestry and Agrifoods Agency.

MR. MITCHELMORE: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

As I said previously, we have permanent staff. We have an incident management team. We have the appropriate equipment and protocols to deal with the forest fires that have taken place in the past week.

We have issued our call backs to our entire complement of our firefighters that will be dealing with forest fires throughout Newfoundland and Labrador. We are well equipped.

We would encourage a message to all Newfoundlanders and Labradorians to be extremely cautious, to get the proper burning permit that is required and to be responsible when you're looking at forest fires in Newfoundland and Labrador, given that the situation has been dry.

We were thankful we've had a significant amount of rain that's happened over the last little while, mitigating some of those consequences of how a fire could take place.

Thank you.

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Member for Mount Pearl North.

MR. KENT: Mr. Speaker, he admits it's been dry. He admits people should be extra cautious. Yet, he's delaying the call back of firefighters that are much needed.

It gets worse, Mr. Speaker. We also understand a number of firefighting related positions will not be filled and some firefighting depots in this province will close this year.

I ask the minister: How many positions in fire services will be eliminated? How many and which depots will be closed? When will you be upfront and tell people in Newfoundland and Labrador?

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Minister Responsible for the Forestry and Agrifoods Agency.

MR. MITCHELMORE: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I'm happy to answer the Member opposite's question. I want to point out that the forest fire season has not begun in Labrador because of the significant amount of snow that has taken place.

This is a normal procedure of calling back our firefighters in Newfoundland and Labrador. We have a number of positions that have been vacant for quite some time – under the previous administration – that we are no longer going to

be filling. The Member opposite had ample time in Estimates to ask those particular questions.

We have no anticipation, at this point, that any office, forest depot, will close in this particular season. I would say to the Member opposite, I don't know where you're getting that particular information.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Member for Mount Pearl North, for a very short question.

MR. KENT: Mr. Speaker, how will response times be impacted by these expected cuts to firefighting positions and also cuts to depots to protect the people of Newfoundland and Labrador?

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Minister Responsible for the Forestry and Agrifoods Agency.

MR. MITCHELMORE: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I will say that during this particular fire season there is no anticipated cut to any particular depot, that we will continue to operate our forest firefighters and operations as per normal, and we're monitoring the situations and ensuring we have the adequate supports in place to ensure that our forests and our resources and our people are well protected. So I will say we do have resources on the ground, and I would say to the Member opposite to stop fear mongering.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

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

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

Students are worried the introduction of forgivable loans as a part of student financial aid is the thin edge of the wedge and, in future, non-forgivable loans will be part of the loan package de rigueur, driving up student debt, and students out of the province.

I ask the Premier why government made this major policy shift when we need students to stay in our province and help rebuild our economy.

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Minister of Advanced Education and Skills.

MR. BYRNE: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

I want to thank the Member for the question, and as well for the exchange we had this morning in Estimates about this topic. As we spoke to each other this morning, I explained that with the student financial assistance envelope Newfoundland and Labrador will still be offering our students one of, if not, the most generous student financial assistance packages in the country. With grants now eligible for lower income students, middle income students, 30 per cent over the cost of tuition, and with other supports available, we are still the envy of the country.

Now, within addition to that, we'll still have a loan portfolio that as a student progresses through their academic studies and passes is fully forgivable.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

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

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

The minister repeated what I said.

This morning we also heard in Estimates that government says it is working on a new Population Growth Strategy.

I ask the Premier: What part of that strategy is going to deal with the continued exodus of our young people with high debt loads?

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Minister of Advanced Education and Skills.

MR. BYRNE: Mr. Speaker, Newfoundland and Labrador students have one of the lowest student debt load portfolios anywhere in the country. In fact, one of the keys here about having a low

student debt load is that we have the lowest tuition rate in all of Canada.

Statistics Canada was able to provide that information, and we're continuing on with that program of providing an opportunity for MUN and for CNA to continue on with a very, very low tuition through the tuition freeze offset.

We're now investing well over \$52 million this year in maintaining the tuition freeze opportunity, and we think that's going to help very much with student debt loads.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

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

MS. ROGERS: Mr. Speaker, the Finance Minister is boasting she listened to hundreds of people before bringing down her disastrous budget. She's now saying she's listening to the thousands and thousands who are protesting here and across the province.

I ask the Finance Minister: Will she prove she is actually listening and change her unfair and regressive budget to make it one that actually stimulates the economy and creates jobs?

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

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

MS. C. BENNETT: Mr. Speaker, we recognize that this budget is impacting people throughout the province and as individual as their circumstances are, that's as individual as the impacts.

What I can say is that we are concerned about all people in this province. We are concerned about our children and that we are now paying more on debt expenses than we are on actually educating our kids. We are concerned about vulnerable residents, and that's why we lessened the impact of this budget through the Newfoundland Income Supplement. We are concerned about the burden of increased debt and what the potential inability to borrow might mean to future services, Mr. Speaker. Those are the things that we are very concerned about.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

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

MS. ROGERS: Mr. Speaker, the minister has ground this economy to a halt. She is stifling it. She is smothering the economy here in Newfoundland and Labrador. She is not bringing us forward at all.

The municipalities are outraged at government downloading more on their already cash-strapped towns. They've written government and they said they don't have the resources to run libraries on their own.

I ask the Minister of Education: Did he even consult with municipalities before he so offhandedly said they could run these libraries that he is closing?

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Minister of Municipal Affairs.

MR. JOYCE: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Once again, I say to the Member, before you make statements in the House, you should see if they are accurate. The statement she is making in this House is fundamentally, factually wrong. What we have said is that there's a one-year reprieve on the libraries that are in municipal buildings. I will consult with municipalities to see how we can work this.

You're here asking why don't the minister consult, here's the minister saying we'll consult with the municipalities and you're saying no, it's wrong. If you're going to make a statement in the House, make sure it's fundamentally correct.

Because what we will do, we will work with municipalities to see how we can provide those services in those areas, Mr. Speaker. There has been no heavy-handed tactics taking place here. There has been no tactic to say you have to do it. That is fundamentally wrong, so please do your research.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. SPEAKER: The time for Question Period has expired.

Presenting Reports by Standing and Select Committees.

Presenting Reports by Standing and Select Committees

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Member for Baie Verte – Green Bay.

MR. WARR: Mr. Speaker, the Resource Committee have considered the matters to them referred and have directed me to report that they have passed without amendment the Estimates of the Department of Advanced Education and Skills; the Department of Business, Tourism, Culture and Rural Development; the Department of Environment and Conservation, and the Office of Climate Change and Energy Efficiency; the Department of Fisheries and Aquaculture; the department of Forestry and Agrifoods; the Department of Natural Resources, and the Office of Public Engagement.

Mr. Speaker, I'd certainly like to thank all the departments and their staff and the Members of the Resource Committee. I respectfully submit the report.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. SPEAKER: Further reports?

Tabling of Documents.

Notices of Motion.

Notices of Motion

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Member for Labrador West.

MR. LETTO: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I moved, seconded by the Member for Torngat Mountains:

WHEREAS Wabush Mines pensioners have experienced a reduction in pension benefits of 25 per cent for the non-unionized pension plan

members and 21 per cent for the unionized pension plan members; and

WHEREAS those reductions have happened because of Cliffs Natural Resources entering bankruptcy protection under the Companies' Creditors Arrangement Act, better known as CCAA, and given relief in contributions to the pension plans resulting in a significant unfunded liability in the plans; and

WHEREAS many pension plans across Canada are experiencing significant unfunded liabilities and could meet the same fate as Wabush pension plans;

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador support the efforts of the federal Members of Parliament, led by the MP for Labrador, in seeking amendments to the CCAA to ensure pensioners are given priority on the secured creditors' list during the bankruptcy protection process.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Government House Leader.

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

Pursuant to Standing Order 63, the private Member's resolution just entered by the Member for Lab West is that one that will be debated this Wednesday.

Further to the Standing Orders, specifically Standing Order 11, I give notice that this House do not adjourn at 5:30 p.m. on Tuesday, May 10.

I further give notice, pursuant to Standing Order 11, that this House do not adjourn at 10 p.m. on Tuesday, May 10.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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 Centre.

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

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

WHEREAS the Deficit Reduction Levy is an extremely regressive surtax, placing a higher tax burden on low- and middle-income taxpayers; and

WHEREAS surtaxes are typically levied on the highest income earners only, as currently demonstrated in other provinces as well as Australia, Norway, and other countries; and

WHEREAS government states in the 2016 provincial budget that the personal income tax schedule needs to be revised and promises to do so; and

WHEREUPON the undersigned, your petitioners, humbly pray and call upon the House of Assembly to urge government to ensure that the Deficit Reduction Levy be eliminated and any replacement measure be based on progressive taxation principles, and that an independent review of Newfoundland and Labrador's provincial income tax system begin immediately to make it fairer to Newfoundlanders and Labradorians.

And as in duty bound, your petitioners pray.

Mr. Speaker, these are signatures from Lab City, from Stephenville Crossing, from Wabush, from Robinsons. They're from all over the province – from St. John's, Flat Bay. The whole province is represented. We have put in hundreds of signatures, and we're getting hundreds every day into our office. People who have bothered to download that petition, get it signed, and then send it to our office. That's because they believe it's so important. What it's calling for is for

government to stop the levy and to do a review of taxation for fair and progressive taxation.

Mr. Speaker, the budget this government has delivered is not a progressive budget. It doesn't create jobs. It doesn't stimulate the economy. As a matter of fact, the Minister of Finance –

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Oh, oh!

MR. SPEAKER: Order, please!

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

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

As a matter of fact, what the Minister of Finance has done in this budget is that she has stifled the economy. She has ground it to a halt, and the fact is people are waiting for the one-two punch for September, for six months down the road. Why did she do that? Why did she prolong that? That means people are sitting on their wallets. People are cancelling their summer holidays because they don't know, come September, whether or not they're going to have a job.

That is not stimulating the economy. That is not what propels us forward. That is not what is good for this province. We need jobs, we need diversification, we need leadership and we need hope. This budget contains none of that. As a matter of fact, it's exactly the opposite and it stifles our economy.

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.

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

WHEREAS the people of Fortune Bay – Cape La Hune need to have access to adequate health care; and

WHEREAS the local clinics in rural areas are the main source of medical assistance for our people; and

WHEREAS the government has reduced funding and closed the Hermitage clinics and downgraded services in the Coast of Bays region;

WHEREUPON the undersigned, your petitioners, humbly pray and call upon the House of Assembly to urge government to reinstate the services to the health care in rural Newfoundland and Labrador.

Mr. Speaker, it was a devastating day for us in the District of Fortune Bay – Cape La Hune when we heard news that we were having significant cuts to health care in the region, the closure, complete closure of a clinic in Hermitage.

Mr. Speaker, for any of you who have travelled to my district, you would know that we are geographically very widespread. The weather is such that in the summertime, in the months of June, July and August, it's nothing unusual to have 40 or 50 days straight of fog and you can't see two feet in front of you. I've experienced that myself.

We have a growth in the aquaculture industry. The roads are narrow roads and there's a heavy volume of transport traffic on that road. Seniors are nervous driving at the best of times, let alone having to flee across in an ambulance when they haven't been stabilized at a clinic.

It is absolutely deplorable to see these types of services being downgraded. We have to do everything to reverse it. I am sure that Central Health can take a second look and find other areas of fat besides the front line services. If something has to be cut, trim the things that are non-essential but front line services are absolutely essential.

People coming from McCallum and Gaultois, they land in Hermitage off the ferry. There's no taxi for them to call to get to Hermitage, so how

are they going to get there? If they are a senior or if they are on income support, Mr. Speaker, then that cost falls to government because the cost of that taxi ride or the cost of that ride – once they find someone to bring them, because there is no taxi. So they're going to have to see if there's somebody available in the community who can help them when they get off the boat to get to Harbour Breton. It is absolutely outrageous what is happening here.

I implore the minister to go back, take a second look. Ask Central Health to take a second look at where some of the excess fat can be trimmed and restore those services to the front line. We also lost our dialysis, Mr. Speaker, and we lost visitation once a month to Hermitage and McCallum.

I'll be back to speak about more. We are absolutely devastated and we will not stop until we see these services restored.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

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

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

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

WHEREAS the Deficit Reduction Levy is an extremely regressive surtax placing a higher tax burden on low- and middle-income taxpayers; and

WHEREAS surtaxes are typically levied on the highest income earners only as currently demonstrated in other provinces as well as Australia, Norway and other countries; and

WHEREAS government states in the 2016 provincial Budget that the personal income tax schedule needs to be revised and promises to do so;

WHEREUPON the undersigned, your petitioners, humbly pray and call upon the House of Assembly to urge government to

ensure that the Deficit Reduction Levy be eliminated and any replacement measure be based on progressive taxation principles and that an independent review of the Newfoundland and Labrador provincial income tax system begin immediately to make it fairer to Newfoundlanders and Labradorians.

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

Once again, Mr. Speaker, I'm honoured to be able to stand and present these petitions that are coming into us on a regular basis. I encourage the Members across the way to listen because they may find some of their own constituents have signed these petitions.

I have people today not just from St. John's, from Coomb's Cove, from Wreck Cove, from English Harbour, from Belleoram, from Mainland. We have a quite a number today from Mainland, from the whole area in the Stephenville area. We have signatures from Corner Brook as well, Mr. Speaker.

People are contacting us from all over the province. I'd like to point out in the House too that it's not just people, it's not just where they're contacting us from – the government might think that it's only people who are going to be impacted by the budget who are sending in petitions, and I want to tell them that's not the case.

Yesterday I had a doctor come to me and say: Lorraine, we know I have a lot of money; we know I'm in the top tax bracket in the province but they shouldn't be doing this. Hit me harder because I have the money to give. Don't hit low-income people and seniors.

I've had more than one person in that position come to me and share that. So even top tax earners in our province who are making the highest salaries are coming and saying this is the wrong way to do it. This levy is wrong. As this person said to me yesterday, you know a lot of it upset me but then when that levy was on top of everything else, I said they don't know what they're doing.

I really suggest that the government not just hear what's being said but listen to it.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Member for Cape St. Francis.

MR. K. PARSONS: Mr. Speaker, I sat down purposely so I could let the lady get up before me, the gentleman that I am.

Mr. Speaker, a petition 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 the federal government cannot justify discriminating against Newfoundlanders and Labradorians when determining the dates of the recreational food fishery;

WHEREUPON the undersigned, your petitioners, humbly pray and call upon the House of Assembly to urge government to be vocal in calling for the Government of Canada to extend the recreational ground fishery to Newfoundland and Labrador to promote fairness, safety and tourism in our province.

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

Mr. Speaker, every time we get up here in the House of Assembly and we present petitions, we're presenting petitions from Newfoundlanders and Labradorians because we want the government to listen to what they're saying. I really don't know if they are or not because I know all these petitions that are here presented today are important to the people that we present them for.

I just want to talk a little bit about the fishery because I really don't know if the federal government is paying attention. I know that right now a lot of people in my area are waiting to see what the quotas are going to be on groundfish. The people in recreation are waiting to see what's going to happen with the tag system this year that they're talking about now. I heard this weekend that the tag system is going to cost too much money so they're going to scrap it.

People want to know what's on the go. Apparently they're our cousins in Ottawa that are up there working, all six of them are up there working hard on the fishery for Newfoundland and Labrador. Well, the fishermen don't think so and people in this province don't think so because they're not hearing anything. They need to hear something because it's getting close; we'll soon be in the middle of May – especially our fishermen, our fishermen are really concerned with what they're hearing about quotas this year. They don't know what the quotas are going to be.

People need to be prepared. A lot of this fishery is done through gillnetting and stuff like this so people have to get their gear ready before they go on the water, get the boats ready and stuff like this.

Again, with our recreational fishery, it's very important that we let the people know that we're not going to do what we did in the past. In the past we put people out. My biggest concern over the recreational fishery is when people go out that they have a safe day to be able to go out on the water. It's so important. We've lost lives. Every year we've lost lives and lives that should never be lost.

People just want to know that they can go out and they can catch the fish for their families. They can bring it home. Their friends, neighbours, people can get out and catch a few fish, something that we're all accustomed to, something that makes us who we are as Newfoundlanders and Labradorians. It's so important that this get done, but it's getting dragged out. Now is the time. People want to know.

I've been presenting this petition since we started. I don't think we're any further ahead. I've talked to people and they really don't know what's happening. I call upon the Minister of Fisheries to call on the Premier to talk to your cousins in Ottawa and start thinking about our fishery.

MR. SPEAKER: Order, please!

MR. K. PARSONS: Thank you very much.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Member for Mount Pearl North.

MR. KENT: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I'm glad to have an opportunity to rise again today to present another petition to the House of Assembly.

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 an extension is urgently needed at St. Peter's Primary school in Mount Pearl in order to accommodate full-day kindergarten and the growing school population;

WHEREUPON the undersigned, your petitioners, humbly pray and call upon the House of Assembly to urge government to clarify its position and plan so that St. Peter's Primary and other schools in Newfoundland and Labrador can properly accommodate students when full-day kindergarten commences in September 2016.

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

Mr. Speaker, I've had some productive discussions recently with the Newfoundland and Labrador English School District. I was able to bring a number of concerns that have been raised by parents directly to the school board and make some suggestions about possible solutions that could improve upon a bad situation over the next couple of years.

We now know the extension won't be ready until the fall of 2018. So for the next two school years, there are things that can be done to make a really bad situation a little better. That's all we're asking for. Class sizes are a real concern. Admission into the French immersion kindergarten classes has now been capped. No additional students are being accepted or added for September. There are some minor modifications being made to the existing kindergarten classrooms to allow for a little more space by eliminating cloak rooms; not

ideal, but at least some improvements are being made.

We've now learned only two modular classrooms can actually be accommodated on the school site. There's a water line that runs behind the property that does pose a practical challenge in that regard. Additional portables would definitely improve the situation.

Because of the construction that's upcoming, the playground at the school will be impacted, which is a real concern for parents. We don't want children trapped in an overcrowded building all day long. When the weather co-operates it's good for the kids to have a chance to get outside. There is an opportunity, potentially, to move the playground to the other side of the school with the co-operation of the neighbouring church. I'm glad that's been explored. I've asked the school board to make that a priority as well.

Given the complexity of the situation and the overcrowding and the number of students with special needs at St. Peter's, but mainly due to the overcrowding and the size of the school population, we've also asked that consideration be given to the addition of a second vice-principal position at the school which we think would help address some of the concerns that will inevitably arise in the fall as well.

A number of parents are expressing interest in bringing the school lunch program to St. Peter's. I recognize that needs to be initiated at a school level. I hope that school officials will be pursuing that.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Oh, oh!

MR. SPEAKER: Order, please!

MR. KENT: Mr. Speaker, we're going to have six vacant classrooms at Mary Queen of the World in the fall. Creating a French immersion stream at Mary Queen of the World would solve this long-term problem. It won't solve it completely, but it will make a real difference. I hope to have a chance to address more points related to this issue the next time I get to speak.

Thank you.

MR. SPEAKER: Further petitions?

Orders of the Day

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Deputy Government House Leader.

MS. COADY: Mr. Speaker, Order 6, second reading of Bill 25.

Mr. Speaker, I move, seconded by the Minister of Health and Community Services that Bill 25, An Act To Amend The Hearing Aid Practitioners Act, be now read a second time.

MR. SPEAKER: It is moved and seconded that Bill 25, entitled An Act To Amend The Hearing Aid Practitioners Act be now read a second time.

Motion, second reading of a bill, "An Act To Amend The Hearing Aid Practitioners Act." (Bill 25)

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Minister of Health and Community Services.

MR. HAGGIE: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

The Hearing Aid Practitioners Board of Newfoundland and Labrador is established under the *Hearing Aid Practitioners Act*. It is the regulatory body responsible for registering hearing aid practitioners and for regulating the practice thereof, the fitting and selling of hearing aid devices across the province.

It currently has 21 hearing aid practitioners licensed to practise in the province. As with other self-regulating health professions in Newfoundland and Labrador, the statute governing the practice of hearing aid practitioners, the *Hearing Aid Practitioners Act*, contains provisions which establish a disciplinary process to deal with complaints about the conduct of a hearing aid practitioner.

A part of that disciplinary process may result in a complaint being referred to an adjudication tribunal for a hearing. The individuals that sit on an adjudication tribunal are selected from a panel, and that panel is made up of a pool of members of the profession, along with other members who represent the public interest.

Once appointed, an adjudication tribunal holds a hearing regarding the complaint made against a practitioner, it hears evidence and submissions, it makes a decision as to whether the conduct of the practitioner in question is deserving of sanction, and it may also therefore impose sanctions accordingly. If an individual is found guilty of conduct deserving sanction, the practitioner's licence could be suspended or conditions or restrictions could be placed on his or her ability to practise.

As a self-regulating profession, hearing aid practitioners are accountable to the members of their own profession, as well as to the public. It is the responsibility of the board to ensure that only those hearing aid practitioners who carry on the profession in accordance with all applicable standards of practice be permitted to practice in the province.

An important principle of self-regulation is being judged by one's own peers. Appearing before peers for unprofessional conduct acts as a significant deterrent for practitioners. It also ensures that a practitioner's conduct is examined from the professions point of view.

Currently, under the act an adjudication tribunal must consist of two practitioners licensed to practice in this province and one public member. Given the broad authority of tribunals to impose sanctions and the potential impacts of those, the hearing process much be fair and be seen to be fair. One way to ensure a hearing is fair is to have tribunals consist only of members who have no personal interest in the outcome of the hearing.

It's important that members of the tribunal have an open mind and not be influenced by improper considerations when they make a decision. It's also important there's no perception that the member has a personal interest in the outcome of a hearing.

If a member has a personal interest in the outcome of a hearing, he or she may become a biased decision maker. Actual bias exists when a decision maker has a closed mind or a personal, business or other material interest in the hearing outcome. However, it's not necessary to show actual bias. It's only necessary to show a reasonable apprehension of bias exists.

Bias exists where a reasonable person, knowing all of the facts surrounding a tribunal member, suspects that the member may be influenced by improper considerations that may result in him or her favouring one side over another in the hearing. If a tribunal member is biased, this takes the decision that's made by an adjudication tribunal as a whole and the bias could potentially lead to the tribunal's decision being overturned.

A bias decision maker would not be viewed as impartial and must therefore be disqualified from sitting as a member of the tribunal. If it is determined that a reasonable apprehension of bias exists, it would then be necessary to appoint a new adjudication tribunal that does not contain bias members and the hearing process would have to start over.

In the recent past, the Newfoundland and Labrador Court of Appeal overturned a decision of an adjudication tribunal appointed under the *Hearing Aid Practitioners Act*. The tribunal imposed sanctions on a licensed hearing aid practitioner. The court overturned the tribunal's decision based upon a finding that a reasonable apprehension of bias existed. This reasonable apprehension of bias was created as a result of business and personal relationships between the tribunal members and the hearing aid practitioners.

Given the small number of hearing aid practitioners available to be appointed to a tribunal, Bill 25 aims to expand the categories of individuals who can sit on a disciplinary panel and ultimately on an adjudication tribunal where there is an allegation that a tribunal member is biased.

The proposed amendments to Bill 25 would be, firstly, the authority to appoint hearing aid practitioners licensed in other provinces to sit on an adjudication tribunal where necessary, and the authority to appoint a lawyer to sit on an adjudication tribunal when necessary.

Currently, an adjudication tribunal appointed under the *Hearing Aid Practitioners Act* must contain three members. Two hearing aid practitioners licensed in the Province of Newfoundland and Labrador and one person who represents the public interest.

Bill 25 provides that hearing aid practitioners from another province and a lawyer may be appointed to adjudication tribunals where necessary. This provides a disciplinary panel with the discretion to appoint those individuals where it is unable to appoint a tribunal made up of two hearing aid practitioners who are licensed in this province. We know of one circumstance in which this discretion may be exercised is where there is a reasonable apprehension of bias.

The amendments contained in Bill 25 would apply only if it's not possible to constitute a tribunal with two hearing aid practitioners who are licensed in this province. To ensure professional expertise is available to address any practice issues which arise during the process, it will be necessary for there to be at least one hearing aid practitioner, whether licensed in this jurisdiction or another, to sit on any adjudication tribunal established under the act.

My department has consulted with the board on the proposed amendments throughout the drafting process and the board is supportive of Bill 25.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, hearing aid practitioners provide a valuable, important service. It's important that as a self-regulating profession, the practitioners board has the tools it need to ensure a high-quality service by skilled and competent practitioners and that it continues to be offered to the people of this province.

I suggest that Bill 25 will assist the board in fulfilling its mandate, and I would ask that all hon. Members of this House join me in supporting Bill 25.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MADAM SPEAKER (Dempster): The hon. the Member for Mount Pearl North.

MR. KENT: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

I'm pleased to have an opportunity to rise and speak to Bill 25 today, An Act To Amend The Hearing Aid Practitioners Act.

As the minister outlined quite well in the last few minutes, this bill would amend the *Hearing Aid Practitioners Act* to enable the board to appoint a disciplinary panel or the chairperson of a disciplinary panel to appoint to an adjudication tribunal a person other than a hearing aid practitioner licensed in this jurisdiction where it is necessary to do so.

It sounds far more complicated than it is. I recall this issue coming up during my time in Health and Community Services. I think this is a good piece of legislation and I think the department and the minister are making some changes that make good sense and are necessary. While the amendments are small, they are necessary amendments.

As the minister indicated, it really was inspired by a case back in 2011 that highlighted the potential of bias influencing decisions. These amendments we're making here today if this bill passes, and I suspect it will, aim at providing options to mitigate chance of bias influencing decisions.

I'll just briefly comment on a few of the sections of the bill, the amendments to the act. I'll just make a few general comments on why I believe this to be a good piece of legislation.

In section 1, it actually extends the definition of licensed hearing aid practitioner from one that is licensed exclusively in this province to now include hearing aid practitioners licensed in other provinces. What the department is doing through this change is expanding the pool of possible candidates for the disciplinary panel. Given the small number of practitioners in our province, this is a logical and responsible thing to do.

In section 2, building on that, it allows a more diverse group of individuals to be appointed to a disciplinary panel. Past legislation restricted the panel to five hearing aid practitioners that were licensed in Newfoundland and Labrador. This amendment will make it more flexible as required, when necessary, to include hearing aid practitioners that are licensed from other provinces, as well as lawyers from Newfoundland and Labrador, as the minister indicated.

Notwithstanding, the disciplinary panel must have at least two hearing aid practitioners appointed to it; however, neither practitioner from outside Newfoundland and Labrador or a lawyer can sit as chair. So despite these changes, the chair must still be a hearing aid practitioner within our province. In addition, two members of the panel must not be hearing aid practitioners. Those individuals represent the public interest and they will be appointed by the minister.

In section 3 of the bill, we are talking about the adjudication tribunal. This framework remains the same in the proposed act with three persons being named to the adjudication tribunal. The members of the adjudication tribunal will be chosen from the disciplinary panel. However, past legislation restricted the two hearing aid practitioners to having to be licensed in Newfoundland and Labrador. So that's now expanded with various options if, in the opinion of the chair of the disciplinary panel, it's necessary to appoint.

There are a number of possible combinations here, for instance, a licensed hearing aid practitioner in the province and a hearing aid practitioner licensed from another province, one from Newfoundland and Labrador and a lawyer, a licensed hearing aid practitioner from another province and a lawyer, two hearing aid practitioners licensed from another province. Plus, in all cases, there will be a third person appointed that will represent the public interest.

The chairperson of the disciplinary panel will appoint either a licensed hearing aid practitioner from Newfoundland and Labrador or from another province to be the chairperson of the adjudication tribunal. Madam Speaker, it's relatively simple but also important for the profession. There are practical reasons why this legislation makes a lot of sense.

I should note as well that the last adjudication, from what I understand, was back in 2008. Very few matters actually make it the adjudication stage, which is why perhaps there hasn't been a lot of urgency associated with this. These are good changes that needed to be made at some point. I know it has been in the works for a little while.

I think it's a proactive step to avoid future issues as well. There are currently 21 licensed hearing aid practitioners in Newfoundland and Labrador. That's a relatively small group when you compare it to other professions, particularly health care-related professional fields. This kind of problem is not uncommon. When you have small groups, it does present challenges when selecting disciplinary panels because of issues concerning bias. So these changes through this bill will help address that.

Madam Speaker, a good piece of legislation is being brought in for the right reasons. It's one on this side of the House that, at least in speaking for the Official Opposition, it's one that we're prepared to support.

Thank you.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MADAM SPEAKER: The hon. the Member for Virginia Waters – Pleasantville.

MR. B. DAVIS: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

I'm just happy to see the support from my hon. colleague for Mount Pearl North on this bill. Disciplinary provisions are an important aspect of any self-regulating health profession legislation. The primary mandate of any self-regulating health profession is one of public protection; that is ensuring that the qualified health professional provides service to its clients and that it's top notch.

In order to fulfill this mandate, it is important for the self-regulating health profession to have a process in place to deal with complaints made about conduct of those health professionals. Under the *Hearing Aid Practitioners Act*, after a complaint is received regarding the conduct of a hearing aid practitioner, the board registrar may attempt to resolve the matter. However, if the matter is not satisfactorily resolved by the registrar, the matter is referred to the complaints authorization committee. This committee is comprised of at least three members of the board, including at least one person appointed to represent the public interest.

Madam Speaker, the committee has a number of powers, including the ability to refer the matter

back to the registrar for investigation or alternate dispute resolution, conduct an investigation itself, appoint a person to conduct an investigation on its behalf, or dismiss the matter altogether. However, if the complaints authorization committee is of a view that there is reasonable grounds to believe the hearing aid practitioner has engaged in conduct deserving of sanction, the committee may do a number of things, including cautioning that practitioner, instructing the registrar to refer the matter to a disciplinary panel.

Madam Speaker, the chair of the disciplinary panel is then responsible for appointing an adjudication tribunal from its members. This tribunal is responsible for conducting the hearing and making the determination as to whether the practitioner has engaged in conduct deserving of any sanction. During the hearing, the parties can call witnesses, present evidence and make submissions. The adjudication tribunal has a broad authority to impose sanctions, including the ability to suspend a practitioner's licence and impose other conditions and restrictions as necessary.

Madam Speaker, it is imperative that the regulatory body act in an expeditious and thorough manner in addressing any complaints received regarding a professional's conduct which may require the engagement of a disciplinary process.

Madam Speaker, Bill 25 is a short bill, but it is an important one, as my colleague and the Minister of Health and Community Services already brought forward. Having a robust disciplinary process is important for protecting the public, as well as protecting the rights of individuals that have been alleged to have done something wrong.

Madam Speaker, the public needs to feel confident that the disciplinary matters involving a regulated health professional will be handled appropriately. As well, a health professional who is subject to any complaint must have access to a disciplinary process that is fair, open and transparent. The amendments to the *Hearing Aid Practitioners Act* contained in Bill 25 will help ensure that an adjudication tribunal may be constituted in all instances where a disciplinary process is required.

It's not expected that these amendments will be utilized in all instances. It is anticipated that the hearing aid practitioners from the province will be able to sit on many of these tribunals; however, the amendments will follow the hearing aid practitioner's licence, licensed in other jurisdictions, and/or lawyers to be appointed to sit on this adjudication tribunals, where necessary.

Without the amendments contained in Bill 25, it is possible that an adjudication tribunal could never be formed in certain instances such as where a reasonable apprehension of bias exists, as was mentioned in the remarks of the Minister of Health and Community Services on this bill. This will prevent the disciplinary process from proceeding and could result in a complaint against the hearing aid practitioner never being adequately resolved. Preventing a disciplinary process from proceeding is not in keeping with the public protection mandate of self-regulating professions.

Madam Speaker, I'm asking all Members of this hon. House to join me in supporting Bill 25.

Thank you.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MADAM SPEAKER: The hon. the Member for St. John's East – Quidi Vidi.

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

I'm happy to speak to this bill this afternoon, Bill 25, An Act to Amend the Hearing Aid Practitioners Act. I'm not going to explain the whole act; I think the Minister for Health and Community Services did that and my two colleagues who have spoken ahead of me have done a good job of doing that. Just to say that it's obviously an act that is needed and it's a good sign because it's a sign of an area of health care delivery in our province becoming more and more professional. I think that's very important.

This deals specifically with hearing aid practitioners. I'd like to point out – this is not being critical of anybody; it really isn't. It is just that any time lately that I've been saying hearing

aid to people I know who are involved in the profession whether as practitioners or audiologists, they correct me. Apparently the new term and the term that they prefer is hearing instrument. It's not hearing aid anymore; it's hearing instruments.

As a matter of fact one day I said to a cousin of mine about six months ago about his new hearing aid. He said, excuse me, it's my hearing instrument. But it is the professional term now. Maybe down the road we'll see a bill coming to the floor where the name of the act will be changed to the hearing instrument practitioners act.

The importance of this bill, however, is that it's giving a structure to the organization and to the practitioners; a structure to help them deal professionally with issues that may arise. In particular, of course, it has to do with giving them an instrument to use dealing with conflict resolution. This is extremely important because with any profession – professions both internally or people from outside can have problems with any professional and there has to be a way of dealing with those problems.

If, for example, a problem comes up, and there's a conflict that comes up and conflict resolution or alternative means of conflict resolution do not seem to work, then you can have what is now being put in place, an adjudication tribunal. The tribunal, of course, for this group is going to be composed of three people. They will be selected from a larger disciplinary panel that is appointed ahead of time.

The amendments are very, very straightforward. They give the directions for how the panel and the committee should be set up. It allows for even having to find somebody from outside of the province, if need be, to serve on the adjudication tribunal if it ever has to be set up.

What's important, though, on that adjudication tribunal is that the chair much be a hearing aid practitioner, but if, for whatever reasons may arise, they cannot come up with a hearing aid practitioner in this province to be on the adjudication tribunal, then somebody can be brought in from outside of the province. That person would have to be, I think, a licensed

hearing aid practitioner as well recognized by this province.

One of the things I would like to ask the minister is to speak to the issue of the cost of an adjudication tribunal like this if an hearing aid practitioner, one or more, had to be brought in to be on the tribunal, for example, would their cost be covered and how would that cost be covered. I think it would be interesting to know that.

This bill does bring to mind, though, some concerns that are out there among people involved in the profession. I put it out as something for the minister to think about, not in light of passing this bill but of future work that needs to be done.

As I said, I do know people who are practitioners and I also know audiologists. There is a concern out there that we do not have enough specifics in our province with regard to – not with regard to regulations or licensing, licensing happens, and there are regulations with regard to licensed practitioners – but the need to differentiate between audiologists and hearing instrument practitioners, and some concern that it would be really good to have very clear things put in place defining the real scope of practice of hearing aid practitioners and the scope of practice of audiologists. Just like there's a difference between teachers and teacher aids, there's a difference between dentists and denturists.

It's a piece of work that certainly I think is required. I really did not know until speaking to some of these professionals that that wasn't in place. It was this bill that got me to ask questions of some people, what are concerns that you have, and this is what they have raised. I think it's extremely important.

I don't know if it's because awareness has increased in the province, but more and more I am meeting people who are needing and wearing hearing instruments. I think it is important for them to know that sometimes you may go to a licensed practitioner, but that person may not have the skills that are needed to help you understand – not understand what's going on with your ears, but actually be able to diagnose problems with the ears. It's not clear all the time

that it's not just a practitioner that one may need to go to; one may need to go to an audiologist.

The recognition of the different scopes of practice of those two groups is important, and that wouldn't be in the act, of course, the *Hearing Aid Practitioners Act*, but their scope of practice could be in the *Hearing Aid Practitioners Act*. So I just put that out for the minister to think about as we continue down this road of being concerned about people in this profession.

Having said that, Madam Speaker, obviously we will be voting for this bill here in our group and happily doing so. I do encourage the minister to think about the points I've raised with regard to helping professionalism increase in the whole area of hearing aids.

Thank you very much.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MADAM SPEAKER: The hon. the Member for Burin – Grand Bank.

MS. HALEY: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

I'm pleased to rise in this hon. House today to speak in favour of Bill 25, An Act To Amend The Hearing Aid Practitioners Act.

It's an important piece of legislation because it strengthens and modernizes the *Hearing Aid Practitioners Act* which was a vital step in recognizing hearing aid practitioners as professionals, Madam Speaker.

Let me first speak to the importance of professionalization in an industry like this. Our hearing aid practitioners provide a valuable and critical service in our province. They help people. They give people back the gift of independence which is a very empowering thing that deserves to be celebrated.

Hearing loss is a disability that affects a very large number of Canadians, Madam Speaker. Nearly 25 per cent of adults in Canada report suffering from some form of hearing loss, though it is much like 10 per cent who actually report some form of deafness.

Four in every 1,000 babies born in Canada, Madam Speaker, will be born with some degree of hearing loss or will develop early progressive childhood hearing loss.

Hearing loss is the third most prevailing chronic condition in older adults and it's the most widespread disability in Canada. By the time people reach the latter stages of their life, between the ages of 45 and 87, some 46 per cent of Canadians suffer some degree of hearing loss.

The number one contributor to hearing loss is aging. Here in Newfoundland and Labrador, we have the fastest aging population in Canada. We're aging fastest for a number of reasons, but primarily because we lost so many young families to the outmigration during the economic downturn in the 1990s. All the younger people that left during that time have had families, but they've had families somewhere else, Madam Speaker.

With unmanaged hearing loss, older adults can become withdrawn and socially isolated leading to the breakdown of support networks and the onset of depression. Unmanaged hearing loss places people at a greater risk of developing cognitive decline and disorders such as Alzheimer's disease.

Hearing loss also increases the risk of falls, which can have a devastating impact on our seniors, Madam Speaker. It is estimated that 90 per cent of people with hearing loss can improve their communication with a properly fitted hearing aid; 90 per cent, Madam Speaker, that's a staggering percentage.

Anyone operating within compliance of guidelines is therefore deserving of public trust and confidence, as well as the recognition of their peers. That's a very important goal and it's one that we see in many other professions.

The legal profession is bound by a similar set of regulations and for the same reason. These rules are meant to protect lawyers, the legal profession and consumers of legal services alike. That is the real value of professionalization, Madam Speaker; it protects all stakeholders by providing a system of checks and balances that ensure confidence and adherence to best practices.

So the *Hearing Aid Practitioners Act*, written into law in 2005, was a vital step in legitimizing this essential service, provided by well-trained practitioners. What we are debating today in this hon. House is a set of amendments that will strengthen and modernize that original piece of legislation.

The Hearing Aid Practitioners Board currently oversees a professional membership of 21 hearing aid practitioners who are licensed to practise in our province. These are the professionals that help the people of Newfoundland and Labrador. They are the people who are helping our seniors retain their independence, Madam Speaker. These 21 practitioners are worthy of professional protection just like any other health care practitioner in our province, and that's why the act was such a necessary and important piece of legislation.

The amendments in Bill 25 mostly concern the disciplinary process, which is an important aspect of professionalization. This is an absolutely critical mechanism for preserving both public confidence in the profession and confidence in practitioners of the profession themselves.

The disciplinary process recognizes that there is a code of ethics and a professional standard that must be upheld by all licensed members of the profession. The disciplinary process adds weight and consequence to the code of ethics and the professional standards, Madam Speaker. There are similar processes for other self-regulating health professions in our province.

If a member of the public or a fellow practitioner wishes to lodge a complaint against someone licensed under the *Hearing Aid Practitioners Act* then the board can appoint a disciplinary panel. It's necessary that various stakeholder groups are represented on a disciplinary panel. Bill 25 stipulates that two members of the board should represent the public interest.

This is important because the public's confidence in the integrity of a profession's standards is absolutely vital, Madam Speaker. The public must at all times be made to feel they can place trust in the professionals who are offering them their service. Requiring that the

disciplinary board feature two members looking out for the public interest is therefore an important addition to the legislation and it recognizes that the public is a key stakeholder in any professional regulating body.

Ultimately, what Bill 25 does is ensure we have the best legislation possible on the books to look after our hearing aid practitioners, Madam Speaker. It strengthens the professional regulating body that governs hearing aid practitioners; it strengthens the disciplinary process which is crucial to ensuring the confidence of major stakeholders in the profession, including the public and practitioners themselves. It allows the profession to self-regulate even more effectively.

Bill 25 will empower hearing aid practitioners in our province to operate in a professional capacity with confidence there is a regulating body looking after their interest and the interests of the public. I am very pleased to speak in support of Bill 25.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MADAM SPEAKER: The hon. the Minister of Health and Community Services, if he speaks now he will close the debate.

MR. HAGGIE: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker.

It's heartening to hear support from all sides of the House for this fairly modest piece of legislation, and I would urge the House to vote in favour of it.

Thank you very much.

MADAM SPEAKER: Is it the pleasure of the House that the said bill be now read a second time?

All those in favour, 'aye.'

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Aye.

MADAM SPEAKER: All those against, 'nay.'

Carried.

CLERK (Ms. Barnes): A bill, An Act To Amend The Hearing Aid Practitioners Act. (Bill 25)

MADAM SPEAKER: The bill has now been read a second time. When shall the bill be referred to a Committee of the Whole House?

AN HON. MEMBER: Now.

MADAM SPEAKER: Now.

On motion, a bill, "An Act To Amend The Hearing Aid Practitioners Act," read a second time, ordered referred to a Committee of the Whole House presently, by leave. (Bill 25)

MADAM SPEAKER: It is moved and seconded that I do now leave the Chair for the House to resolve itself into a Committee of the Whole to consider the said bill.

Is it the pleasure of the House to adopt the motion?

All those in favour, 'aye.'

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Aye.

MADAM SPEAKER: All those against, 'nay.'

Carried.

On motion, that the House resolve itself into a Committee of the Whole, Madam Speaker left the Chair.

Committee of the Whole

CHAIR (Dempster): Order, please!

We are now considering Bill 25, An Act To Amend The Hearing Aid Practitioners Act.

A bill, "An Act To Amend The Hearing Aid Practitioners Act." (Bill 25)

CLERK: Clause 1.

CHAIR: Shall clause 1 carry?

The hon. the Member for St. John's East – Quidi Vidi.

MS. MICHAEL: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Just one question that I asked sort of throughout second reading, and I hope the minister can answer at this time. It has to do with the cost of the adjudication tribunal. For example, the cost, period, if they had to bring a practitioner from outside of the province to be on the tribunal, would they have their costs covered? Who would cover that? Maybe it's covered by the professional association, but I don't know. I'm just putting the question out there so we'll have clarity.

Thank you.

CHAIR: The hon. the Minister of Health and Community Services.

MR. HAGGIE Thank you, Madam Chair.

It is my understanding that all the self-regulating professions or each of the self-regulating professions under the *Health Professions Act* is responsible for collecting fees as part of its licensing requirements. Those fees are used to offset any costs for tribunals and disciplinary processes.

As part of the sanctions imposed, they can actually insist the practitioner found worthy of sanction would actually be responsible for defraying some of the costs of the hearing as well. So there are mechanisms; my understanding is it's entirely an internal process.

CHAIR: The hon. the Minister of Health and Community Services.

MR. HAGGIE: Just to address another point that was brought up about scopes of practice – now the hon. the House Leader has returned, the pressure at the time is gone. The issue of scopes of practice, my understanding is it is defined under the regulations and that is part and parcel of the role of professional board in its licensing is to determine scopes of practice.

This actually arose from a case that was appealed to the Supreme Court of Newfoundland and Labrador Court of Appeal back in 2008. The members of the panel turned out to have close enough ties to the person who

was being adjudicated upon. The Appeal Court judge felt that was a reasonable apprehension bias on several occasions. So it proposes a hierarchy.

You would firstly try and populate the tribunal with folk from the province, licensed in the province. If you couldn't find a practitioner or the right number of practitioners licensed within the province, you would look for practitioners licensed in another jurisdiction. And in the event there was still a gap on the professional side, a lawyer would be your default safety net, if you like, based on their ability and training in fair process and adjudication approaches.

That's the logic behind this. If there are any more questions, I'd be happy to try and answer them.

CHAIR: Seeing no further speakers, I'll ask shall clause 1 carry.

All those in favour, 'aye.'

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Aye.

CHAIR: All those against, 'nay.'

Carried.

On motion, clause 1 carried.

CLERK: Clauses 2 and 3 inclusive.

CHAIR: Shall clauses 2 and 3 inclusive carry?

All those in favour, 'aye.'

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Aye.

CHAIR: All those against, 'nay.'

Carried.

On motion, clauses 2 through 3 carried.

CLERK: Be it enacted by the Lieutenant Governor and House of Assembly in Legislative Session convened, as follows.

CHAIR: Shall the enacting clause carry?

All those in favour, 'aye.'

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Aye.

CHAIR: All those against, 'nay.'

Carried.

On motion, enacting clause carried.

CLERK: An Act To Amend The Hearing Aid Practitioners Act.

CHAIR: Shall the long title carry?

All those in favour, 'aye.'

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Aye.

CHAIR: All those against, 'nay.'

Carried.

On motion, title carried.

CHAIR: Shall I report Bill 25, An Act To Amend The Hearing Aid Practitioners Act carried without amendment?

All those in favour, 'aye.'

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Aye.

CHAIR: All those against, 'nay.'

Carried.

Motion, that the Committee report having passed the bill without amendment, carried.

CHAIR: The hon. the Government House Leader.

MR. A. PARSONS: I move, Madam Chair, that the Committee rise and report Bill 25.

CHAIR: The motion is that the Committee rise and report Bill 25 carried without amendment.

All those in favour, 'aye.'

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Aye.

CHAIR: All those against, 'nay.'

Carried.

On motion, that the Committee rise, report progress and ask leave to sit again, Mr. Speaker returned to the Chair.

MR. SPEAKER (Osborne): The hon. the Deputy Speaker.

MS. DEMPSTER: Mr. Speaker, the Committee of the Whole have considered the matters to them referred and have directed me to report Bill 25 carried without amendment.

MR. SPEAKER: The Chair of the Committee of the Whole reports that the Committee have considered the matters to them referred and have directed her to report Bill 25, An Act To Amend The Hearing Aid Practitioners Act, carried without amendment.

When shall the report be received?

MR. A. PARSONS: Now.

MR. SPEAKER: Now.

When shall the said bill be read a third time?

MR. A. PARSONS: Tomorrow.

MR. SPEAKER: Tomorrow.

On motion, report received and adopted. Bill ordered read a third time on tomorrow.

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Government House Leader.

MR. A. PARSONS: Mr. Speaker, I call from the Order Paper, Order 4, second reading of Bill 3.

I move, seconded by the Minister of Natural Resources, that Bill 3, An Act To Amend The Parliamentary Assistant Act And The Parliamentary Secretaries Act, be now read the second time.

MR. SPEAKER: It is moved and seconded that Bill 3 entitled An Act To Amend The Parliamentary Assistant Act And The Parliamentary Secretaries Act be now read a second time.

Motion, second reading of a bill, “An Act To Amend The Parliamentary Assistant Act And The Parliamentary Secretaries Act.” (Bill 3)

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Government House Leader.

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

I’m happy to stand here today in this House of Assembly and speak to this new piece of legislation. I guess it’s not a new piece of legislation, but it’s certainly one that’s offering fundamental changes to the parliamentary secretaries and parliamentary assistants piece of legislation. I’m happy to do so, on behalf of our Premier. This is what I would consider a following through of a promise and a commitment that the Premier made some time ago.

Before I get into it, I want to provide some background to individuals who may be watching, to give them some context on what a parliamentary assistant or a parliamentary secretary is. Again, I know there are speakers from other sides who will also give commentary and some, in fact, may speak more coherently or more eloquently than I, but I’ll try my best to get across the crux of the matter here.

In our system we obviously have a Cabinet made up of a number of ministers. The number of departments can go up or down depending, and we’ve seen that over time. Some of these departments – and this has been legislated – have parliamentary secretaries. These are individuals, legislators, parliamentarians, Members of the House of the Assembly usually on the government side, obviously, who serve as a parliamentary secretary to the minister of a particular department.

In our case right now as I speak here, we have five parliamentary secretaries in the House of Assembly. We have the parliamentary secretary for the Department of – and I may get this acronym wrong – I think it’s BCTRD. It seems like it’s –

AN HON. MEMBER: BCTRD.

MR. A. PARSONS: BCTRD, it switches. I call it the department of acronyms sometimes. It’s

changed over time but it’s Business, Culture, Tourism and Rural Development – it’s changed, but I think people get the idea. It’s close enough.

AN HON. MEMBER: Culture.

MR. A. PARSONS: And Culture, yes.

We have the Department of Child, Youth and Family Services which is also combined with the Department of Seniors, Wellness; we have the Department of Health and Community Services; the Department of Municipal Affairs, which in this case operates with a minister that also is responsible for Service Newfoundland and Labrador; and also, we have the Premier’s office, which also has not a parliamentary secretary, but a parliamentary assistant. We’ve seen this over some time. These individuals are quite busy. In many cases they do a lot of the same briefings, activities and events, legislative and otherwise, for the ministers.

A lot of these portfolios are very large. Just look at Health for instance; it’s a huge portfolio, a huge budget expenditure, a number of events, a number of activities, maybe a number of pieces of legislation going on at any particular time. The fact is that you need someone to assist the minister when it comes to handling the obligations and responsibilities of that particular portfolio.

I think we all recognize the good work that parliamentary secretaries do and parliamentary assistants. This has been operating for some time. I would also note that it’s not exclusive to this jurisdiction. It is something that we see in other jurisdictions as well and with good reason.

One of the things we’ve identified though, obviously, is that we’re in a situation where we have a negative fiscal situation in this province. There’s no surprise to that. It’s something we’ve been talking about in this House for some time now over the last number of weeks and months and, certainly, before the House was reconvened, we were speaking about it right then. That’s no surprise.

Back prior to the campaign, one of the commitments that the Premier made is that – we think what we need to do here is that these parliamentary secretaries, we need them to

continue to do the work that they are doing. However, what many people don't realize is that they are paid a remuneration which is set out by the legislation. I think it actually works out to – and I may be wrong, somebody can quote me – \$27,000 per individual. So it's not a small amount of money when you're looking at the average salary of Newfoundlanders and Labradorians. So in this case what we are saying and what we are proposing in this piece of legislation is that the remuneration aspect be removed from the parliamentary secretary.

Now I don't think for a second it's meant to convey that the work done is not valuable, there's no doubt about that, and I don't think you're going to get that argument from anybody in this House. The work they do is extremely valuable. The situation, though, is we have a province right now that's facing an unprecedented fiscal mess that we've inherited.

One of the things we can do – and there are some large measures we can take, there are some small measures we can take. The fact is what we are trying to do here is twofold. Number one, we're suggesting the remuneration be removed and that these people continue to do this work; but, again, there would be no extra remuneration on top of an MHA's regular salary.

The second thing we are suggesting is that in fact we be able to increase the number of parliamentary secretaries that any government has. Now, the fact is one would say, well, what is the downside of doing that? I would suggest there is no downside to having individuals who are willing to take on an increased role in making sure our government operates as efficiently and as well as possible.

The fact is you have another individual, an elected Member, that's willing take on this responsibility for another particular department that the Premier sees as necessary. I think that's a positive move. I think it shows fiscal responsibility. I think it shows that – again, we've got five, but there are other departments where, do you know what, there's a significant workload. I think you can ask any minister, and I don't think that's just on this side. I think it is previous ministers, previous governments.

The fact is being a member of Executive Council, being a minister, there's a significant amount of work that comes with it. The fact is that somebody you can have on your side with you ensuring your department is running as efficiently and as smoothly, and as well, as functional as possible, is a step in the right direction. I don't think there's any doubt. The fact is we've been very lucky on this side to have a number of people who have been doing this since December 15, doing this role.

Now I would note for those who are out there listening, we are basically legislating what we've already done in practice. What we've done in practice is the fact that none of our parliamentary secretaries or assistants have been remunerated for this extra work since they began. That's a significant change from previous administrations.

There is no extra pay for these individuals, even though they've agreed on behalf of the people they represent, and on behalf of the province, to take on this role. They do it because they know it is the right thing to do. It's the best thing to do to make sure that we have a fully effective and functioning government.

This is not a surprise. This is something the Premier announced in this House, I believe, as late as last year. He might have done it the year before. It certainly was a part of the commitment going forward and this is our opportunity now to put this legislation forward. Notice was given, we've had first reading.

I believe Members on the opposite side, including Members of our own caucus, were given an opportunity to be briefed and to discuss this. I look forward to the opportunity as we move forward this debate to – again, Members will have their opportunity to contribute their say, as well as to ask questions during the committee phase.

The fact is government is a significant entity. There's a huge amount of work that's happening on a day-to-day basis. I don't think anybody in this House disagrees with the fact that we need to be doing the best work we can because at the end of the day we're here on behalf of the people. We expend the taxpayers' money on behalf of the people.

So the fact that we have (a) people who are willing to take on this work; (b) we're willing to increase the size of those people, the number of people, the complement of people who can make our departments run smoother, more efficiently; and finally, there will be no increased cost. In fact, we're going to decrease the cost to the taxpayers of this province by taking away that pay component. Again, it has nothing to do with the work. It has everything to do with the situation that we find ourselves in.

I'm sure I'll get an opportunity during the Committee stage – I know Members on the other side may have an opportunity to ask questions. I'll certainly endeavour to answer them as fully and completely as possible. I think I've covered off the main aspect.

If anybody were to actually look at this piece of legislation, it's not significant in size per se. In fact, there are only six sections that are actually being changed. So it's not a tremendous effect on the currently existing piece of legislation.

I would note for the record that I believe other provinces may have the same system but in other provinces, I think New Brunswick in particular, they actually do the same thing already. There's no pay for the extra administrative and parliamentary role that these individuals take on.

The fact is we see a number of them are quite busy. I know the parliamentary secretary for Health and Community Services is constantly on the move. When you take a department that is significant in size and importance as Health and Community Services, the fact is that one minister simply cannot be in every place that he has to be at the same time.

A lot of times, too, it's important work when you're talking about dealing with and consulting with stakeholders. For instance, I know the parliamentary secretary actually attended an event today on behalf of, I think it was multiple sclerosis. There was a flag raising, and in fact talked to a number of people. It was great to see that.

This is just one aspect of the work they do. They meet with these important groups, with these stakeholders, individuals and have these

conversations. They know it's not just the minister they can speak to and it's not just – it's not just speaking to somebody in the department. It's speaking to an elected official, somebody who was elected by the individuals in their district, so speaking to an accountable individual. Again, I'm not saying the people in the department are not, but there's a difference between a civil servant, obviously, and an elected official.

I look at the minister who sits behind me, the Minister of Business, Tourism, Culture and Rural Development. He's probably out at an event right now. The fact is that event alone actually has a significant number of events ongoing at any time, meeting with different businesses when you're talking, meeting with different stakeholders. Just the number of groups that is brought under one single department is tremendous. The fact is we have a parliamentary secretary who also gets an opportunity to represent our government and represent our province.

I would note when I look at the Member, another significant change that came here and I've seen in the past – I think the Member opposite, the Member for Mount Pearl North actually complimented this on the day, and I think it's a good thing. The fact is as Members there are oftentimes when we're not in the House due to personal circumstances, due to events, or you may have to attend a conference. The fact is that doesn't mean, though, that the Opposition doesn't have questions relating to that minister's department or a decision that's going on.

In fact, in the past what you would often have is if the minister responsible is not available for that kind of reason, you have an alternate minister who has to stand up and answer that question. Again, we all have alternate roles. That's not going to change.

The fact is we've already had a situation here where the Member opposite stood up to ask a question, the minister was unavailable, obviously for a commitment for that department, so the parliamentary secretary – for the first time, I believe, in the history of this Legislature – on behalf of his minister stood and answered questions from the Opposition to ensure –

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. A. PARSONS: – and that was a significant moment.

I think that's better for everybody, because obviously the questions that the Opposition ask – and I can say this having sat there and asked questions. The questions are important. They matter. The fact is we always endeavour to give the best answers that we can.

The fact is I certainly think a parliamentary secretary for a department can provide a much better answer to a question than an alternate minister who is busy dealing with the day-to-day goings on of their department. I think nobody is going to doubt that, and I think it was a step in the right direction.

I know parliamentary secretaries are ready to stand. They're briefed every day. They know exactly what's going on in that department. They are fully prepared to answer questions if their minister can't be in the House on that particular day; which happens all the time. In fact, it has happened forever. The fact is you cannot be here sometimes because of work commitments, or, unfortunately, in some cases because of personal commitments.

So that's a practice I think the Members on the opposite side, I hope they think that was a step in the right direction. I think it was a step in the right direction, and certainly I think the Member who stood that day and answered questions did a tremendous job. In fact, I don't know, sometimes I wonder maybe you have answered even better than the minister could have. I say that facetiously.

The fact is that the minister stood and did a tremendous job that day. He answered the question and made sure that the question answered got the relevant facts, more so than perhaps if I were the alternate minister than I'm going to be able to provide in that particular case.

I don't want to belabour this too much. I think I've laid out the reason we are doing this. I do think it is a positive step in the right direction. I'm hoping that we will get support from Members opposite, but I fully expect them to

give their position on this and to ask questions. We'll certainly do our best to answer those as we go through this process.

It is a pleasure to stand here and speak to this bill, Bill 3, on behalf of our government, on behalf of the Premier. An opportunity to speak in this House is always a pleasure.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Member for Mount Pearl North.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. KENT: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I appreciate the opportunity to speak again today, this time regarding Bill 3, An Act to Amend the Parliamentary Assistant Act and the Parliamentary Secretaries Act. The purpose of the bill, as the Government House Leader outlined, is rather straightforward. It removes remuneration for parliamentary secretaries and the parliamentary assistant to the Premier as well. It removes the provision requiring that no more than four parliamentary secretaries hold office at one time.

Mr. Speaker, I'll begin by just giving the quick highlights of the bill, and then I'll provide some commentary on the bill, both positive and negative. While I have no problem with the bill overall, I do have one question and concern, more of a concern than anything that I'll raise in response to the Government House Leader's comments today.

The bill amends two acts, as I've said. In terms of amendments to the *Parliamentary Assistant Act*, section 1 of this bill removes the salary for the parliamentary assistant to the Premier. Section 2 of the bill clarifies that the parliamentary assistant will be reimbursed for their expenses.

In the *Parliamentary Secretaries Act*, section 3 of this bill allows government to appoint more than four parliamentary secretaries. Section 4 of the bill clarifies that parliamentary secretaries

are not to be paid salary, but will be reimbursed expenses.

On a slightly light note, Mr. Speaker, it was just late last week, I believe – it was in the last number of days – someone who has a particular interest in what goes on in this House of Assembly was looking at the Order Paper and the bills that are coming forward. They said: Oh, they're going to eliminate pay for the parliamentary secretaries. I said: Yes, they are. He said: Well, I've been telling everybody they've broken every election promise; they're actually going to keep this one.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. KENT: It's good that in this instance the government is doing what they say they're going to do. They did make a commitment during the recent election campaign and in this particular instance in terms of taking away pay for parliamentary secretaries and the parliamentary assistant on that point, they are keeping their commitments. That should be applauded.

I will resist any temptation to make any further commentary about election promises during this debate. I will be talking about election promises during other debates but during this debate, we'll stick to the matter at hand.

Bill 3 states that the parliamentary secretaries and assistants will be entitled to reimbursement of expenses via the Minister of Finance out of the Consolidated Revenue Fund. Bill 3 will permit government to appoint as many parliamentary secretaries and assistants as they wish. So as per the Ministerial Expense Reimbursement Policy of Executive Council, October 2013, the Ministerial Expense Reimbursement Policy, with the exception of automobile allowance, is applicable to parliamentary secretaries, parliamentary assistants and other members who are conducting business on behalf of a minister that's related directly to the department.

Here's my concern, Mr. Speaker. At no point in time did the Liberal government ever state publicly that their plan was to create a process that would allow them to make additional appointments of parliamentary secretaries. My concern is not that we're going to have more

parliamentary secretaries; I think that could be a really good thing. I've been a parliamentary secretary on several occasions. I've worked in several government departments with several ministers as a parliamentary secretary, and I was actively engaged in the work of the department. I had real meaningful work to do on behalf of the government and on behalf of constituents in the province, and learned a lot.

It prepared me well to eventually take a seat at the Cabinet table because I got a first-hand view, first-hand knowledge of the running of a department, some of the issues that a minister faces, how decisions get made, how the minister's office interacts with staff in a department, how the minister interacts with other government departments; some of the minister's external work, especially, meeting with stakeholders, advocates, community groups, communities. You get a real flavour for how a ministry works when you get to serve as parliamentary secretary.

That's an important part of how the political arm of government operates. I know some of my colleagues, the Members that will speak to this legislation today – we have one, two, three, four Members of our caucus, five Members of our caucus who have served as parliamentary secretaries at one point in time. So you're not going to hear anybody on this side say that parliamentary secretaries or parliamentary assistants are a bad thing. They play an important role when properly utilized.

My only concern is this. The Government House Leader said this is going to save money. At this point in time, I would agree with him. You have the same number of people no longer being paid, but still doing the work. They'll be paid for their travel expenses and accommodations. I know most of them are rural MHAs; also a good thing. Their cost will be covered when they're coming to the department for government business and travelling on behalf of the minister for government business, whatever the case may be; but if all of a sudden, you had double the number of parliamentary secretaries who were incurring those kinds of expenses in a department, travelling frequently back and forth from rural districts to Confederation Building or wherever the department office is located, in

theory – it's more than a theory – that could get costly.

Now, the work is important work. I'm not suggesting the work shouldn't be done and we shouldn't have more parliamentary secretaries, but what I'm saying is this could actually cost more. That's not a reason to vote against this bill, but I think it needs to be pointed out that if you all of a sudden you went to having a dozen parliamentary secretaries, you could have virtually everybody who's not in Cabinet in the government as a parliamentary secretary.

So if they're travelling back and forth on government business for the department, the costs of that are insignificant. The overall cost of parliamentary secretaries, at that point, would be much greater than it is today and much greater than it was a year ago. That just needs to be pointed out.

There's also a political concern. I've talked to numerous rural MHAs on both sides of the House. They do have a difficult job in terms of getting back and forth and effectively representing their constituents while balancing the need to be here and to be in Confederation Building and to be working with government departments and with caucus and so on.

Government MHAs would be at a real advantage if – and perhaps more importantly from our perspective, Opposition MHAs would be at a real disadvantage if just about every Member of the other two rows behind the front bench on the government side, if all of those folks were parliamentary secretaries and would have incredible freedom and flexibility to be travelling back and forth and be compensated for that, while Opposition MHAs would be very restricted under the legislation that's in place for Members of the House of Assembly.

There could be a real imbalance, politically; there could be a real unfairness, politically. It could be argued that it would then be much tougher for rural MHAs who are not in government to effectively do their jobs. So that's our concern.

Now government has not indicated that they intend to appoint 10 or 12 parliamentary secretaries, but I would logically conclude that if

you're changing legislation – which you didn't say you were going to do back in the fall – now to allow for more of them, I just want to acknowledge that there is a cost to that. Even if they're not being paid, there's a cost of doing business that's associated with that and there's a potential unfairness or imbalance politically. If all of a sudden you have a whole bunch of government MHAs and government departments, as opposed to the House of Assembly, is going to be paying for their activities and their travel and in some cases some of their office expenses and so on.

So I flag that as a potential concern. Now maybe that won't be an issue. Maybe we won't have to stand in this House in future and raise concern about that. Maybe the intention is to appoint a couple more, but the challenge here is that you could have a parliamentary secretary for each department. Maybe in terms of giving MHAs some real good experience in departments and helping the departments work even better and having that stronger political leadership, that might be a good thing, but there's an issue related to the cost of that. There's an issue related to the political balance and fairness of that. So it's the devil will be in the details in terms of how government chooses to move forward.

It was never indicated publicly that the intention was to change the legislation to allow for a whole bunch more of parliamentary secretaries to be appointed. So, 12 ministers and the Premier today could appoint 13 parliamentary secretaries, and all of these appointments would be entitled to reimbursement for expenses. Not to say there isn't legitimate work to be done for those 13, there very well could be – and it would certainly get more backbench MHAs really engaged in the work of government, but there's a real cost to that. There's a cost to that politically, too, that needs to be considered. That's the only concern I really have with this legislation that's being presented today.

I appreciate the opportunity to speak to it. The Government House Leader, when he closes debate may be able to shed a little more light on what government's intention is. I don't know if it's fair to ask him. The Premier would really have to comment on the intentions when it comes to political appointments and how many

parliamentary secretaries there may be in the weeks or months ahead, or over the next three-and-a-half years. For the reasons I just raised, there is some concern that I wanted to express.

I appreciate the opportunity to take part in the debate. I know other Members in the House on both sides are eager to do so as well.

Parliamentary secretaries are an important part of government process; they're an important part of political process. I value the experience I had and have a great appreciation for the role. I don't want to take anything away from that at all, but I do have those concerns which I'm glad to have a chance to express in this House today.

Thank you.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Member for Placentia West – Bellevue.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. BROWNE: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

It's always a pleasure and an honour to rise in the House of Assembly today to debate Bill 3, the bill to amend the *Parliamentary Secretaries Act* and *Parliamentary Assistant Act*. I want to thank the Member opposite for his commentary as well.

I didn't realize or didn't remember actually, Mr. Speaker, that the Member opposite was a parliamentary secretary prior to being a minister. I know there are several others over there who were also parliamentary secretaries who understand the good work that many of them do. It's certainly a position that carries with it additional duties, but also additional rewards in terms of being able to help your colleagues on both sides of the House, steer them through issues, being a conduit to help them move issues through a department and so on and so forth.

I want to just give some context to those who are listening at home. I know a lot of people often look at government and they see either Cabinet or those of us who are not in Cabinet. There is that layer of parliamentary secretaries there, as the Government House Leader said, Mr.

Speaker, who are there to assist and aid their ministers and in my case, the Premier, in any matters that come before them.

In our Westminster system of government that we've inherited from Britain, we have the Cabinet that is made up of the government caucus Members chosen by the Premier, along with our government Members of caucus, and then up until this point we've had four parliamentary secretaries and a parliamentary assistant. That has worked out well.

This piece of legislation would, as previous speakers have said, first of all, remove the remuneration for the position that otherwise would have been attached to it. It would also not encumber the government not to appoint extra parliamentary secretaries if they so choose.

To respond to the comments of the Member opposite as to whether the government of the day would appoint 12 or 13 parliamentary secretaries, I can't speak to the intentions of future governments, but I certainly don't think that would be the intention here.

The role of a parliamentary secretary, for those who are at home, Mr. Speaker, is broadly to assist ministers. It carries some legislative duties as well.

Earlier today, we heard the Minister of Health present the *Hearing Practitioners Act* and his parliamentary secretary, the Member for Virginia Waters – Pleasantville rose and spoke to that piece of legislation. Some of those legislative duties as well, including committee work from time to time, including attending the Estimates sessions and helping to prepare for those. As the Government House Leader also indicated, there is the added and new and different dimension now, Mr. Speaker, of allowing parliamentary secretaries to answer questions.

I think the Government House Leader raised some very good points when he talked about the fact that if you have a minister with a parliamentary secretary who is absent from the House for whatever reason, attending to their ministerial business or out of the province perhaps attending federal, provincial or territorial meetings, that for a question to come

from the Opposition which is a very important function that the Opposition plays here, to ask government questions, to hold government to account. It is a very important and essential role in our democracy. It's important I think that not only they have the opportunity to ask those questions but get informed answers as well.

I would suggest, as the Government House Leader said, if you have a parliamentary secretary who is working hand in hand with a minister every day, receiving their briefings and attending meetings with them, they know the thinking of the department and the officials there. They would probably be in a good position to answer a question. Even perhaps more so than an alternate minister.

I think that's a very positive step, Mr. Speaker, to allow that to happen. Certainly in the case of where a minister is absent, that provides the House and the people who are watching at home a better ability to have informed answers. That is something new to this House but certainly not new to other chambers. If you look towards Ottawa, parliamentary secretaries there have long answered questions on behalf of their ministers. As I said, Mr. Speaker, I think that contributes to the overall positive answers that people will get and the flow of information generally between the government and departments, the Opposition, and of course the public.

In addition to the legislative duties that a parliamentary secretary or parliamentary assistant would have, they also carry some of the minister's public duties as well in terms of attending functions or taking meetings on their behalf. We have, as the Government House Leader pointed out, the Department of Health is a huge department where there are a lot of stakeholder groups that would want to come in and meet. There are opportunities there for the parliamentary secretary to reach out and do some of those meetings.

The parliamentary secretary for Business, Tourism, Culture and Rural Development also would have quite a large portfolio there to assist their minister with.

There are all kinds of opportunities, Mr. Speaker, for parliamentary secretaries and the

parliamentary assistant to not only deal in terms of the Legislature and assisting the minister in their legislative capacities, but they also have the ability to reach out in the community as they are an elected official. They do carry that weight behind them in their position. They can help the minister and the government of the day reach out into the community in the various stakeholder groups and be that voice on behalf of their department.

They'd also attend functions. I know the parliamentary secretary for Health is gone to one right now. It's a very fluid role in terms of busy and a lot of events and meetings that they have to attend. I don't think for one second that anyone is here today diminishing the role that parliamentary secretaries play. I take the comments from the Member opposite quite well.

Mr. Speaker, the legislative change before us, as has been said, would remove the remuneration. I believe it's right that it was set prior at about \$27,000. So since taking office now in December there has been no remuneration paid to parliamentary secretaries or the parliamentary assistant. That was taken away immediately and so now we're following that up with this legislative change. I believe that's also another follow through from the election platform.

So that was there. We're coming in line now with Atlantic Canada. The other parliamentary secretaries in the Atlantic provinces aren't paid either. We're really taking things back in line.

Mr. Speaker, in this time of fiscal restraint, where we're facing such a dire fiscal situation, I think these changes are certainly welcome by Members on this side, and by the sounds of it, by Members opposite and certainly in the public. I would think that they expect us to hold ourselves to high standards. This is following through on a commitment for financial prudence and accountability.

The legislation, Mr. Speaker, will also reduce the limit on the number of parliamentary secretaries. Right now there is a limit of four and one parliamentary assistant. So this would remove that barrier in terms of the need to appoint more.

I take what the Member opposite said, the concerns he raised. I don't think it would be ideal that a government would come in and have everyone as either ministers or parliamentary secretaries. I don't think that is the aim or intent here, Mr. Speaker. This is really about trying to find the best fit on how governments can work and move forward.

It is a good opportunity for all Members of this House to have an added parliamentary secretary because they are often people that you can go to as conduits to a department to help you move a file through or to help you resolve an issue. As we all know, here in the House of Assembly, it is always helpful as MHAs when we're dealing with constituency matters that we have direct access to the ministers and their parliamentary secretaries to help our constituents move on files as well.

So I think it's important to do this, Mr. Speaker, and I think it's a promise, as the Member opposite said, that we made, and that we are keeping here today, and certainly it's been kept since December 18. For those who are home wondering, perhaps to pull the veil back a bit for them, the parliamentary secretaries were sworn in on December 18. Cabinet was sworn in on the 14th, and MHAs came here to this Chamber on the 18th and we swore our oaths.

It was a great honour that day – I know for me, being the first time elected, to come here and take my oath of office, and later that day the parliamentary secretaries attended a meeting with the Lieutenant Governor and the Clerk of Executive Council where we read our second oaths as parliamentary secretaries and assistant. So a lot of people at home probably are wondering how this all works and how that happens, and certainly that's pulling the veil back on that.

On a day-to-day basis, if anyone is wondering what we would do, it certainly would vary based on the minister, but for anyone who is paying attention to the media releases that go out, you can see the parliamentary secretaries are quite busy attending functions and events, certainly, and dealing with all the things that I talked about; but we're also very active in terms of attending briefings, making sure we are up on the files we are dealing with.

As the parliamentary assistant to the Premier, I have quite a lot of reading to do to make sure I can assist him in whatever way he needs. As an example, we had a private Member's resolution here not that long ago from the Member for Fortune Bay – Cape La Hune, and it was pleasure to rise and speak to that, as the Premier's portfolio also includes Labrador and Aboriginal Affairs.

Certainly you take on the responsibilities that come with the role, and I don't think there is anyone that would say this is not a good decision to save on the remuneration. All totalled, it's a savings of approximately \$135,000 annualized. So that is a good first step in this time of fiscal restraint when the people of our province and the government are being faced with tough choices. I think this is the right step in the right direction, and I am pleased to speak here today.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Member for Cape St. Francis.

MR. K. PARSONS: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

It is indeed a privilege to get up here again today to talk to this bill. Being a former parliamentary secretary myself, I can attest to the work that parliamentary secretaries do.

I just have to mention the Member for – I called it Burin last week, and I apologize to that lady from Burin. I apologize to her mother. I didn't say anything bad to you. I hope she's listening today.

The young gentleman who just got up – the biggest thing they used to say about parliamentary secretaries over the years was it was a great way to prepare people to become a Cabinet minister because of the work you do in the departments. I know a few of the gentlemen here in front of me now who were parliamentary secretaries, I'm sure it gave them great steps to becoming a Cabinet minister and becoming a good Cabinet minister, but there's a lot of work that goes into being a parliamentary secretary.

I know I was involved – this is eight years for me here in politics in the House of Assembly. The last couple of years I became parliamentary secretary. I really realized how important our public service is because what you really do see, as an MHA and as a backbencher, you do get to work a lot and ask for needs and stuff like that, but as a parliamentary secretary you really get to work in the department.

Ministers are very, very busy. I really applaud ministers and the work they do. They're running big departments and sometimes you can't be everywhere all the time. You can't be at two different events and stuff like that. So my job as a parliamentary secretary was to, basically, attend everything I could with the minister; but also there were events that he couldn't attend so I went and attended those events, especially when you go to public events outside the Confederation Building. You have your meetings every day and it's just a matter of walking down the hallway and going to a meeting or whatever, but ministers are in high demand all over the province. Everybody wants to see a minister and wants someone to come.

You wouldn't believe the people who really do appreciate to show that government has a presence, whether it's at an event or whether it's an announcement or anything at all. Parliamentary secretaries do play a major role in government.

I applaud government. This is a good piece of legislation. The Member for Mount Pearl North said when he got up – and I know you laughed a little bit at him, but at least this is one promise that you kept because you haven't kept many other ones. There's HST and no loans and you're listening and stuff like that, but this is a good promise that you kept. I have no problem with it whatsoever.

I know the young Member who got up beforehand, like I said, this is a stepping thing for him, probably, down the road if he has ambition to be a Cabinet minister someday. Most of the parliamentary secretaries here will understand there is a lot to it and what you have to do in the departments. There will be different groups come in all the time who want to meet with the minister. The minister just can't go and meet with everybody whenever he wants to, but

it's important they see somebody from government coming to meet with them because it's important.

You can have all the officials in the room you want, but they still want to know people have been listening to them and they can talk to people in the department. They feel that once a parliamentary secretary is there, if the minister can't make it, well, he's the next best thing, basically. So it's very important.

I do want to make one little comment, though. I want to agree with the Member for Mount Pearl North that I think the legislation should have some piece in it where there are a certain number of parliamentary secretaries. I do realize that there are a lot of ministers that are really busy and it would be nice to have – but still, there's a part of our legislation that limits MHAs coming back and forth to St. John's in a certain period of time, especially the rural MHAs. It doesn't affect me at all. I come back and forth, my office is here.

If you do name 12 or 13 parliamentary secretaries there would be an added cost because that cost goes to the department rather than to the House of Assembly costs. I agree with five. I think five is a good number and you can move them around, knowing which departments are really busy.

I know the Minister of the Department of Health doesn't have the time to go to different events. He's got a very good parliamentary secretary that goes and attends different events for him. The work that the parliamentary secretary does is very important work. There's no doubt about it, but sometimes the minister just doesn't have the time to be able to go do that so it's important that somebody – and it's important to organizations, whether it's in the health care or any organization that somebody does represent them from government. It's very, very important that you do that.

I know when I was with the minister and the minister was out of town or whatever, he liked to try to get back to his district – ministers like to get back to your district during the weekends and stuff like that. It's important that somebody can step – because I'm sure that most ministers over there, if they had to, they'd probably, every

weekend, be in here in St. John's speaking at different events.

So it's important that somebody gives him the opportunity to go back. At the end of the day, no matter what you're doing here, whether you're a minister or parliamentary secretary, or you're a Member of the House of Assembly or in Opposition, we all have to answer to our constituents. So it's important that we make sure that we don't – and I know that it's often been said that there are ministers who spent a lot of time being a minister and forgot about their constituents and they probably paid the price for it down the road. So as a minister, an example the Minister of Health in Gander, I'm sure he likes to get to his district on weekends to be able to attend different functions that he can so people can see him. It's important that he has a parliamentary secretary who can help him.

The general public out there and all the different health organizations, if they have a function or anything on the go, they really want to see someone attend it, so it's a huge role that you play as a parliamentary secretary. I'll tell you, it's eye opening (inaudible). It just really opens your eyes to see how some of the departments work.

Sometimes, I know people look outside government and they look at our bureaucrats and people in our public service and they don't realize that these people spend so much time and take so much pride in their work. When you go into meetings – I know when I was parliamentary secretary, every day there were meetings. On Wednesday morning we had one and then Thursdays we had one. All the time going to all these meetings, it really made me appreciate how hard our public service works and how hard people work in government. Also, in a lot of cases, it really shows you the pride they take in their work. It's important that we show that we're there. It's eye opening sometimes what has to be done.

The parliamentary secretary is a very, very important role. It was nice to see that the Member got up and answered the question too. That was good. I applaud the Member for getting up and doing it. I applaud the government for having a parliamentary secretary do that. I know in my previous years, I think

Cabinet had someone that if the minister wasn't there, someone in Cabinet was like a shadow person that used to get up and do it too. It's great to see parliamentary secretaries do that.

I really want to emphasize that I think the number of parliamentary secretaries should be stated. I think that it would be important for the bill, so you can have a maximum of six or whatever it is. It is a cost factor so people won't – you won't have too many. We have rules and regulations here in the House of Assembly with the number of trips you can make to St. John's and everything for rural Members so people don't take advantage of that. That's just a little cost down the road and stuff like that to look at.

The job of a parliamentary secretary is what I really want to emphasize. I agree with this bill. I agree that it's a great stepping thing for – I really enjoyed my time as a parliamentary secretary. I was fortunate to be living so close to St. John's that I could drive back and forth. I only live 16 kilometres away, so I could be in and out.

There are a lot of times now on the weekends that some of these guys and ladies will have to go to different parts of the province to do different events for the parliamentary secretary. Whether you go to the West Coast, you go to Corner Brook, you go to the Northern Peninsula or you can go to St. Anthony, you can go to Goose Bay, Labrador, whatever, to represent the minister. It's really important and it's an important job that you do.

The Member for Lab West got a great job to do with the Minister of Municipal Affairs. I know this weekend he was out at an MNL symposium out in Gander because the minister was away. I'm sure that the municipal leaders out there were appreciative that government had someone there and someone within the department. So it's an important function that parliamentary secretaries play.

I look at the Premier of the province. The Premier of the province can't be everywhere all the time, so it's important that he have somebody that can go and represent him. That's what you're doing as a parliamentary secretary, you represent the minister. Not only do you represent the minister, there are a lot of things you have to do within the department. It's a very

important job. It's important that the public servants and everybody in that department realizes that there's somebody there that can answer, they can go to.

I know as a Member on government side, also sometimes Members have questions for the minister and the minister is really, really busy. I used to have Members, when we were on government side, come to me and ask me questions within the department. I'd go find out answers for them within the department. That tied the minister – let him get away to his work that he's doing and I could go within the department and find out the answers for the Members.

That's important because that's what we do as parliamentary secretaries when you're over in the department. You go to all these meetings and everything else. You get to meet a lot of people, so you get to know the job of individuals. So if someone calls you and has questions with – it could be something to do with tourism. The person could just go to the person in the department and be able to give the answer to the Members.

I know the Member with Municipal Affairs – a lot of things happen in Municipal Affairs. The minister could be out of town, could be whatever, but it's great to have someone in that department that you can go to at a political level to be able to talk to and probably get you some answers, whether it be a town plan. It could be anything at all that you need to get answer to. So it's important job that they do, that's what I'm saying.

Mr. Speaker, I'm going to just conclude here now by saying I really appreciate the work that parliamentary secretaries do. It's an important job. I know what the job is all about. I know that there's a lot of responsibility you have in your departments. It's important that we do have them.

I'd like to say to the minister that I would like to see some kind of cap put on how many that could be there. We all have important jobs to do in here and we all have our own jobs with our constituents and making sure that we do our job properly. So I'd just like to say I will definitely be supporting this bill because it's okay. Like I

said, it's the one promise that they kept so far that I've seen, so it's not too bad I suppose.

Anyway, Mr. Speaker, thank you very much.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Member for the District of Terra Nova.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. HOLLOWAY: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

It's a pleasure for me to rise as well today, Mr. Speaker, and speak to Bill 3, An Act to Amend the Parliamentary Assistant Act and the Parliamentary Secretaries Act. On December 18, it was my first time sitting here in the House of Assembly and being sworn in as an MHA for the District of Terra Nova. As my colleague for the District of Burin –

AN HON. MEMBER: (Inaudible.)

MR. HOLLOWAY: Sorry, Placentia West –

AN HON. MEMBER: Bellevue.

MR. HOLLOWAY: Bellevue, there you go. All right, we'll get it all right – had said that later that afternoon of course we were invited to the Premier's office and we were sworn in as parliamentary secretaries and parliamentary assistants.

I can remember leading up to that, Mr. Speaker, the Premier had called and said he was inviting me to take on this role. I can tell you I was extremely happy with being given that opportunity, recognizing there was a commitment in the platform that parliamentary secretaries take on this work and not take any remuneration. I probably underestimated, to some degree, the amount of work that was required, and I say that in all honesty. I know we're all working extremely hard in the role we have as parliamentary secretaries and parliamentary assistants.

I embrace this, Mr. Speaker, because this is a tremendous learning opportunity for me. I know amongst the five of us who have this enhanced role, we collaborate on a regular basis. We talk

about the opportunities and the challenges we are going through in learning about this role and also trying to juggle that to some degree with the role as an MHA and all the demands that come trying to meet the requests and trying to help the constituents in your district.

For myself, I spoke at a graduation. Actually, I attended two graduations on the weekend. The one on Random Island, I spoke to that graduation. One of the things I said to those young graduates was that I've guided my life on taking every day as a learning opportunity.

I see being a parliamentary secretary as a learning opportunity as I continue on in this path. So I welcomed it. When the Premier asked me if I would take on this role, recognizing there would be no remuneration, I accepted that 100 per cent, recognizing the benefits that would come from it would be the opportunity to learn more and more.

I must say, I'm particularly pleased with the rest of my colleagues on this side of the House and the other side of the House, Members opposite, in terms of understanding the role they take on as well as the role that Members in Cabinet take on because that enhances my role as a parliamentary secretary in terms of me being able to learn and understand what's going on in all aspects of this House of Assembly. It has also afforded me an opportunity to engage with other ministers in their responsibilities as I bring forward things that are particularly of importance to the mandate that the Minister for Business, Tourism, Culture and Rural Development has.

I can say that when I was first appointed as parliamentary secretary, one of the things the minister I support, one of the things that he quickly said to me was: Look at my mandate letter. My mandate letter is pretty broad, fairly large. We have a lot of work to do over four years.

The minister is responsible for the Department of Business, Tourism, Culture and Rural Development which is massive in itself. He's also responsible for the Research & Development Corporation and the Forestry and Agrifoods Agency. In his mandate there are a tremendous amount of things we have to meet in

the next four years. There's a tremendous amount of work that has to be done.

One of the very first things he said to me was: Look at my mandate, and based on your background and your experience, let's talk about the kind of things you can support me with. I was particularly pleased when some of the things I've had some keen interest in in the past is around animal health and protection. I've had a long experience with animals and animal welfare in the province. I was particularly interested when he said we have to bring forward revised legislation in this House that's going to enhance that act.

One of my responsibilities is to bring forward – along with our staff in Forest Resources and Agrifoods – some amendments to that act. Also, with my experience in public engagement, part of our process is to go out and engage the key stakeholders.

Earlier today, in fact, I had a meeting with some stakeholders in the Minister of Municipal Affairs office. We both sat down with some key stakeholders to talk about the *Animal Health and Protection Act* and some things that are required in terms of enhancing and strengthening that act in this province. Those kinds of opportunities have come forward.

The Minister of Business, Tourism, Culture and Rural Development is also responsible for the development of a provincial agricultural strategy for the province. Well, that's another piece of his mandate he's asked me to lead. As a parliamentary secretary, I have been actively involved with the key stakeholders in the province in terms of understanding where they see this strategy needs to go, what are some of the key components that need to be brought into this strategy and, of course, taking that lead.

One of the strong things – and it certainly was in the platform leading up to the election – is that we need to have food security in this province. That is a part of bringing forward a new agricultural strategy for this province around food security. I'm pleased to say, as a parliamentary secretary, I have been and will continue to be actively engaged in that process.

The other part of what the Minister of Business, Tourism, Culture and Rural Development has asked me to take a lead on is the status of the Artist Act. This is a new piece of legislation for this province. I'm particularly interested in that piece.

On Thursday past, I had the opportunity, with my colleague for – I have to remember the district now – Virginia Waters –

MR. B. DAVIS: Pleasantville.

MR. HOLLOWAY: Pleasantville – there you go.

He and I attended an event with the launch of the lineup for the Newfoundland and Labrador Folk Festival. I remember the festival when I was attending Memorial University. It was a thing I'd look forward to in the Summer, but on Thursday past I had the opportunity to represent the minister and go down and speak at that launch to actually announce that our department, this government, was contributing \$25,000 toward that event. So those opportunities have come forward as a parliamentary secretary.

Not accepting any pay, of course, when that issue came forward and recognizing the fiscal situation we're in in this province, and we are in a very tough spot. One of the things, in addition to the long hours and the hard work that I, along with my fellow parliamentary secretary assistants are committed to doing, the other thing that we can do is also help with some of the cost that is happening.

While nobody likes to not get extra remuneration, I can say it was a long discussion with my family, but at the end it was our part of trying to help out with this fiscal challenge that we have. Not being remunerated for that \$27,000, I'm quite okay with that, Mr. Speaker. It is something we have chosen to do. It's extremely important in terms of trying to cut back and make things more efficient in this province, and I certainly am pleased to be able to play that role.

The Member opposite asked about expenses and who pays for that. I certainly get the point that if you have more parliamentary secretaries, more parliamentary assistants who would be going

around the province representing the minister who's unavailable, representing the department or an agency that is under the minister's mandate, then there could be some additional costs.

Well, just to alleviate everybody's concern. That cost is borne by the budget line for the minister in his travel and communications. If he's unable to attend, then, yes, that expenditure would come under his office. While I would go, it would have been the same as if he had to go, so there's really no additional expense. So I wanted to clarify that and provide that additional information.

Mr. Speaker, in terms of the bill itself, the amendments that are brought forward, I think it's the right bill, a great bill. I'm pleased to be able to stand and speak to it.

I just want to talk about a couple of other things that happens in my role. Each week, each morning, actually, I meet with all the officials in our department at the senior level. I take it upon myself to understand what's going on in the department, what kind of things have happened overnight or over the last couple of days so that I could in this House, if a question comes up, I am quite capable, able, I understand the issue and I can speak to it.

I was particularly honoured on that moment. The Member is not here now, but I appreciate the Member for Mount Pearl – Southlands when he brought forward and asked the question. The minister was away attending some federal-provincial meetings at the time, and so for me to be able to stand up and to be able to answer the question for the first time in the House, to create that moment in time if you will.

I hope that my colleagues, the other parliamentary secretaries and the parliamentary assistant to the Premier, also have that opportunity as we continue to sit in this House and, of course, we sit back in the fall again and over the next four years, we'll have that opportunity to be able to speak and to answer questions when ministers aren't available.

It's a keenly important role, Mr. Speaker, for parliamentary secretaries to be able to understand what's going on in the respective

departments, to be able to perform their responsibilities here in the House of Assembly. Recognizing that we're doing our part to support the process of the House of Assembly and this Legislature, and also following through with the reason we came here, which was to represent the people of our districts.

It is an added piece of work. I would estimate that it's added 25 to 40 per cent onto my day and onto my week. I'm particularly proud to be able to stand in this role and to support not only the department, but also this government as we meet the needs and providing good services and programs to the people of this province.

Mr. Speaker, I thank you for the opportunity to speak to this bill. I obviously am very, very much in support it.

Thank you very much.

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'm very happy to stand in the House today to speak to Bill 3, An Act to Amend the Parliamentary Assistant Act and the Parliamentary Secretaries Act. In their five-point plan – and what we're looking at here, Mr. Speaker, is eliminating a monetary payment for the position of parliamentary secretaries, and also for the parliamentary assistant to the Premier. This is a bill that we will be able to support.

In their five-point plan during the campaign the Liberals stated that parliamentary secretaries have cost taxpayers over half a million dollars since the election. They promised that, if elected, they would demonstrate their commitment to financial prudence and transparency by eliminating compensation for parliamentary secretaries.

And for folks who are watching a parliamentary secretary isn't, in fact, someone who does what is traditionally known as secretarial work; but, in fact, that they are an assistant to the Cabinet

minister and they take on some of the responsibilities and roles of the Cabinet minister if the Cabinet minister is not available, but ultimately the Cabinet minister is still fully responsible for any decisions that are made, for how that department is run.

They promised that they would do this and this is perhaps, so far that we are seeing to this date, one of the few campaign promises that the current government has kept from their election campaign. So, Mr. Speaker, this is somewhat monumental in the House today. They are actually keeping a campaign promise.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MS. ROGERS: So it is monumental.

We're happy to see that government is doing that, that they're actually keeping a promise. It may be a sign of things to come. Maybe they're going to create jobs. Who knows? Or maybe they're not going to raise the HST; maybe the Members across the hall, in fact, are not going to vote for the budget. Maybe this is starting a trend.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MS. ROGERS: It's a job to say, though. Mr. Speaker, it's a job to say whether or not this is a trend, but who knows, it's the first step. It might be the first step in keeping a campaign promise. But don't hold your breath, but watch. Who knows what's coming down the pipe? It's kind of an exciting time, folks.

So what is Bill 3 intended to do? What it's intended to do is to say that there will no longer be salary remuneration paid to parliamentary secretaries and parliamentary assistants by virtue of holding these offices.

I'd like to point out that I would like to thank the Cabinet ministers – it's a big job, it's a huge job and a huge responsibility. Particularly in what so many people are talking about are tough times. Well, we do have extreme fiscal challenges, but the role then of our Cabinet ministers is not simply to go line by line and cut, cut, cut, but the role of those Cabinet ministers is to stimulate the economy, to create jobs, to propel us forward as a province.

So far, we haven't seen that. So far, we haven't seen that kind of work. What we've been seeing is the cut, cut, cut, but we haven't seen any vision; we haven't seen any creative approaches yet from our Cabinet ministers. But again, maybe we will – maybe we will. And we do have tough challenging times, but the thing is: How do we move that forward?

So it's important again – I truly and with all sincerity have so much respect for our Cabinet ministers and for the hard work, for the incredible workload that they do. So it's necessary that they do have assistance through parliamentary assistants, through parliamentary secretaries. The other role that a parliamentary secretary is afforded is a possibility of learning about different departments and different portfolios. That's really important, particularly when we look on passing on knowledge and we do see that Cabinet ministers at times are moved around, and sometimes that's a good thing but, particularly, to be able to share different perspectives.

I would think that one of the valuable roles of a parliamentary secretary as well is to be able to bounce ideas off, to be able to challenge one another's perspectives. That's great, because every one of us in this House has been elected by the people in our districts. Every one of us in this House has been elected because people have placed their trust in us and they've said that they trust we will make good decisions. They trust we will have their best interest in mind.

To be able to share that responsibility is so important. Again, ultimately, the Cabinet minister has the full responsibility for anything that happens in that department. Again, what we want from our Cabinet ministers is to be able to propel us forward, to be able to make decisions, to be able to plan, to be able to really make their departments strong, to be able to come up with creative solutions, to be able to propel the whole province forward.

I also acknowledge for parliamentary assistants and secretaries that that's an extra workload. It truly is, and it means a commitment beyond what you were elected for as a constituency representative, as an MHA. When we're looking at taking away, removing the remuneration for those positions, it means we are relying on the

commitment and the generosity of MHAs who were elected because it is time away from your constituency, time away from your families, but this is what we all signed on for. We know this is a different kind of work we're doing here, and it's an honour to be able to serve in this House.

I also want to acknowledge those who are parliamentary assistants, who are parliamentary secretaries for their commitment and for their hard work. In some departments we know we have fewer Cabinet positions, Cabinet ministers than we did a few years ago and we also know we have fewer MHAs. That simply builds up the workload on everybody who's involved here in this House.

What a great opportunity it is then as well for people to have different experiences. For MHAs to have different experiences. For MHAs to get training. For MHAs to get even – particularly for new MHAs to have a better understanding on how departments work, how different portfolios work and also to have that familiarity with some of our fantastic senior management folks in different departments, people in the public service, our public sector workers.

It's a good thing to have parliamentary secretaries. It's a good thing to share the knowledge base. It's a good thing to look at some of the decisions and it makes it less of a top down exclusive setup in our Legislature.

I would also like to say they also looked at the limitations on expense claims that were in the *Parliamentary Assistant Act*. Currently, parliamentary assistants could only claim expenses incurred when the House of Assembly is open, while absent from St. John's or while away from his or her ordinary place of residence when the House is not in session.

The new section 6(2) allows parliamentary secretaries and parliamentary assistants to be "paid the expenses actually and reasonably incurred by him or her in carrying out his or her duties." This section shows us that there still is money involved. There's travelling back and forth and travelling to be at different events. Sometimes, though, it might save us money if the parliamentary secretary was more adjacent to an event.

One would wonder if maybe just leaving it totally open to the number of parliamentary secretaries may be a bit loose. I would hope that the minister would consider that. Perhaps that's a little bit too loose, perhaps putting some kind of limit on it, again because there is money involved. I don't have a definitive answer to that, but it might be something that is to be looked at. The more we use the talent, the expertise, the commitment and the goodwill of the people in our House of Assembly, the better off we are as a province.

Mr. Speaker, I won't take any further time. I'm really happy to see that this government is honouring one of its commitments. We'll encourage everyone to stay tuned because who knows what other commitments they may honour. We're keeping a tally over here on this side of the House and that's a good thing. I'm sure the people all over the province are keeping a tally.

I thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, for the opportunity to speak to this. Who knows if this is starting a trend, this business of keeping commitments.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

MR. SPEAKER: If the hon. the Government House Leader speaks now, he shall close debate.

The hon. the Government House Leader.

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

I'm certainly again happy to be able to stand up and speak to this very important amendment to legislation. I was also happy; on our side we have some individuals that spoke to it, the parliamentary assistant to the Premier as well as the parliamentary secretary for the Department of Business, Tourism, Culture and Rural Development, BTCRD – I don't know. I'm a bit facetious in that it changes a lot. It's an important department; I can just never remember the name, like the district sometimes.

I also wanted to recognize three Members on the Opposition who also spoke. That's the Member for Mount Pearl North, Cape St. Francis, as well as St. John's Centre and had some very, I think, good points of view to bring to this.

I'm going to try my best to answer a few questions. I do have 20 minutes now so I'll answer a few questions. We will go to Committee on this and if I haven't provided the information, I'll certainly try my best to provide it.

I think one of the concerns brought forward by, I think all three, especially by the Member for Mount Pearl North, I think the Member for St. John's Centre and to her credit I think she's supporting this. Although she was getting a few good points in around the digs but that's how it goes. I've been on that side and realize it, but overall I think she acknowledges, like we all do, that this is a good piece of legislation but they're bringing forward their concerns which are also necessary and warranted as it is with every piece of legislation.

I think one of the concerns that was brought forward, Mr. Speaker, was talking about putting a specific number on it. In my opinion, I guess, I don't like that idea because it requires you to change the legislation every time you want to make a move. So let's just think about it.

Over time we have seen the Cabinet structure in this province grow progressively. I guess it grew a few years back. When I say a few years, I'm even talking in the '60s and '70s it has grown. In the last number of years, even in the previous administration, we've seen it go downwards.

In fact, right now I think we have 12 departments, as well as the Premier's office. I think last year it was 13 departments and the Premier's office. I've seen pictures where you look at the size of Cabinet, I mean it's a significant number where we're talking 20 individuals.

That structure, I don't believe, needs to be legislated. There may be a minute in council. It may go through, obviously, the LGIC but I don't think it's actually legislated. When you're talking about a significant change such as the restructuring of a department, the addition or deletion of a department, that's a significant change. I would say that's more significant than the addition or deletion of a parliamentary secretary. I don't think there's a need to amend the legislation every time you want to change it.

That being said, right now – and the Opposition will do this, as they should do – whenever there's the creation of something new, everybody is going to have an opportunity to add their say to that. If they don't think it's a necessary or worthwhile move they're going to add their commentary to that, but I don't think we should have to change the legislation if we want to change the composition of parliamentary secretaries.

I would also suggest that with the decrease in size of departments, there's obviously an increase in the amount of work that falls on the shoulders of each Cabinet minister. Therefore, the increase in the number of parliamentary secretaries will be corresponding. I would also suggest that the cost to have an unpaid parliamentary secretary is far less than the cost of a department or an extra Cabinet minister. I would put that out there. I bet you that is the case. I don't have the numbers here obviously but if you just look at Cabinet minister's salary versus parliamentary salary, which in this case, by doing this, we are removing the salary. Right now, I think it adds up to about \$135,000 just in the salary component.

I don't like the idea of legislating because it means a change in here every single time. I don't think it's necessary. If there's something the Opposition or public feels is untoward, they'll put that out there. Even through the commentary and the concerns expressed, I think the Opposition also echoed what we're saying – and they can say this because many of them on the other side had an opportunity to serve in that role. They realize and recognize the value of parliamentary secretaries in each department. I don't think there's any questioning that. They're questioning: Are you actually saving any money?

I may get asked the question in Committee and we can go back and forth. That's what I appreciate about the opportunity to debate. It's an actual debate, going back and forth on a point.

I think that's our point when it comes to legislating the actual set number. Right now, we want to allow it so you can change it. It's at the discretion of the Premier, how many the Premier would like to put in. I don't know what the

Premier's plans are for that, but if you're removing the cap, and the fact is you're removing the actual cost, I would assume you're allowing for the possibility of increasing it which, I think, will lead to improved governance is what we're talking about here.

The other thing I would say here is when it comes to cost, as it is with any MHA or any Cabinet minister or any parliamentary secretary, everything is scrutinized and posted online. Any cost whatsoever that is borne by a parliamentary secretary in the commission of their duties will be the same as any cost that is borne by either of us in this House. It is scrutinized. It's put through an intense series of scrutiny by a number of individuals to make sure that it complies with the rules. Not only that, it also gets posted online. So any member of the public who wants to have a look can have a look.

Right now, as a government, we've already moved towards getting rid of discretionary spending and discretionary travel. We've already seen that. That's not an issue here. In fact, I've never understood the purpose of spending money unless you're going to get value for that travel. Any travel now, I think, should bear the scrutiny of the individuals, whether it's the public or anybody else. It also comes from the department's travel budget.

When we're going through this process – as I was going through my department, I look at the travel. The fact is the Department of Justice travel will actually increase this year versus what it was last year because as a rural MHA, I go back and forth more than an urban MHA; but at the same time, if there were a parliamentary secretary, for instance, for the Department of Justice, that's also going to have to be factored into that. Given the situation we're in, we're not going to want a significant increase in travel just to accommodate the duties.

There are a number of things you can do already. You do things to ensure that you get the maximization of the money that's already spent. So if you did have a rural MHA that served as a parliamentary secretary, well you'll do your best. If they're travelling back to their district on a weekend, a cost that they are going to incur, well let's see what we can do to make sure that

functions, events and work is done during that cost, instead of adding an additional cost.

The second thing right now is we're going to look at this within a year as we go through another budget process, and we'll see the results of this. If we see the fact that as the Opposition – and again, I don't think they're saying it will happen; I think they're saying it could happen, and that's fair. Anything could happen. What's going to happen is you've already got an intense scrutiny going on now with any government expenditures, and then when we go through the process next year, we'll have to look at it.

I'm willing to bet with the fact that there's a decreased size of Cabinet, with the reduction in the salary for both, even with the possibility of increased travel costs, I'm willing to say the costs will be far less than that which we are already incurring; and secondly, you're going to see an improvement in the government structure. I think you're going to see better work done.

That's one point I do think we need to recognize as well. I appreciate the Members – all Members that spoke who talked about the work that is done not only by MHAs, it's done by parliamentary secretaries and it's done by Members of Cabinet. There's no easy job in this House of Assembly. Any MHA, no matter who they are, rural or urban, has a tremendous amount of work they do on behalf of their people. Whether it's talking to constituents, getting emails, doing committee work, reviewing legislation, you name it.

It's a busy job. It's an important job. The fact is the parliamentary secretary carries an increased burden; there's no doubt about it. We appreciate the fact they're carrying this burden for the purposes of doing that work for their constituents. Again, going back just very quickly to the numbers again, we see that there are numbers in other provinces. In fact, I think Quebec might be up around 20 parliamentary secretaries. Ontario is 30. I think Manitoba is around six. We have five. I don't think there's actually been a new parliamentary secretary in Nova Scotia for some time.

So the numbers differ and the numbers vary, but in this case we're willing to bet that with the increase, the possible increase – I'm assuming

that there likely would be – and the costs that may come with it will be far, far less than cost of paying the parliamentary secretaries, which is what we are doing right now.

I think what I will do at this point – I know that I'm going to sit down at this point – is thank the Members opposite and the Members on this side for their contribution to this debate. Once we get to the Committee stage, I'll try my best to answer questions as best I can.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Government House Leader.

MR. A. PARSONS: Mr. Speaker, I move, seconded by the Minister of Municipal Affairs, that the House resolve itself into a Committee of the Whole to consider Bill 3.

MR. SPEAKER: It is moved and seconded that Bill 3 be now read a second time.

Is it the pleasure of the House that the bill be read a second time?

All those in favour, 'aye.'

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Aye.

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

Carried.

CLERK: A bill, An Act To Amend The Parliamentary Assistant Act And The Parliamentary Secretaries Act. (Bill 3)

MR. SPEAKER: This bill has now been read a second time. When shall the bill be referred to a Committee of the Whole House?

MR. A. PARSONS: Now.

MR. SPEAKER: Now.

On motion, a bill, "An Act To Amend The Parliamentary Assistant Act And The Parliamentary Secretaries Act," read a second

time, ordered referred to a Committee of the Whole House presently, by leave. (Bill 3).

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Government House Leader.

MR. A. PARSONS: Mr. Speaker, I move, again, seconded by the Minister of Municipal Affairs that the House resolve itself into a Committee of Whole to consider Bill 3.

MR. SPEAKER: It has been moved and seconded that the House resolve itself into a Committee of the Whole and that I do now leave the Chair.

All those in favour, 'aye.'

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Aye.

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

Carried.

On motion, that the House resolve itself into a Committee of the Whole, Mr. Speaker left the Chair.

Committee of the Whole

CHAIR (Lane): Order, please!

We are now considering Bill 3, An Act To Amend The Parliamentary Assistant Act And The Parliamentary Secretaries Act.

A bill, "An Act To Amend The Parliamentary Assistant Act And The Parliamentary Secretaries Act." (Bill 3)

CLERK: Clause 1.

CHAIR: Shall clause 1 carry?

The Chair recognizes the hon. the Member for Mount Pearl North.

MR. KENT: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'm pleased to have an opportunity in Committee to speak to Bill 3 once again. I won't reiterate my earlier points, but I appreciate the opportunity to have a good debate and discussion about this. I'll raise my concerns very

briefly once again. Perhaps the Government House Leader will wish to make some commentary.

Again, I have no issue with remuneration being removed for parliamentary secretaries and parliamentary assistants. I had two concerns about the decision to make them unlimited. Bill 3 clearly states that parliamentary secretaries and assistants will be entitled to reimbursement of expenses out of the Consolidated Revenue Fund. Bill 3 also now, for the very first time, permits government to appoint as many parliamentary secretaries and assistants as they wish, which practically could make some sense and politically could make a lot of sense to have every Member of the government attached to a department in one form or another.

I really had two concerns and the real practical one I'll raise first. Perhaps the Government House Leader will wish to comment. It's just about cost. He's right that a parliamentary secretary, unpaid, costs far less than a new ministry. There's no doubt about that. Also, today, there's definitely no argument from anybody that there will be savings today, assuming you only maintain the five you have. Those positions would have been drawing a salary a year ago and they're not drawing a salary today, then there's savings.

The concern is that if you all of a sudden had a dozen parliamentary secretaries and they're all being paid by departments instead of by the House of Assembly to travel as many times as required back and forth to their districts and come to, presumably, the Confederation Building four days a week, five days a week, whatever the case may be when the House is closed – because there's a different set of rules that apply to MHAs when the House is open – then my concern I guess, and it's not a big concern, but just when we talk about how we're going to save money, all I'm saying is that there's potential for this to actually cost more money.

Maybe those are dollars well spent. Maybe having more MHAs engaged with departments is a good thing for the political arm of government. Maybe it's a good thing for government overall. Time will tell, I guess, but I just want to point out to the House that there is a

cost to that. That really is the first fundamental concern that I have.

At no point in time during the campaign were the Liberals stating that it was their plan to create the opportunity to have more parliamentary secretaries, to make more of these appointments. While I don't think that's a bad thing, I just raise the issue around cost for what it is – not a major concern, but a concern that I felt should be raised none the less.

Will we save money today? Yes. Might this actually cost us more money down the road depending on the number appointed? I would say yes, Mr. Chair, and that's the first point I wanted to raise in terms of cost. I hope during Committee to have more opportunities to make a couple of more points.

Thank you.

CHAIR: The Chair recognizes the hon. the Government House Leader.

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

In response to the Member's questions, I understand what he's saying, but the word I would use is highly speculative right now. You're speculating that if you do this, it could result in this. You could make those speculations or commentary on any decision that is made by any government at any time.

I understand the point you're trying to get across here, which is, yes, you're making savings now, but will there be savings tomorrow. The fact is we will know that very clearly, I would assume after a year of this. Now what I can say is that (a) any travel will come from a pre-existing departmental travel budget, that's the first thing. Number two, I don't think for any second that every Member of government is going to be linked to a department. Theoretically, you could do absolutely anything, but that's not the actual reality. The fact is that we have considered those factors.

I agree with the point the Member makes in that be careful when you make a decision that you think has result A when it could have result B. I can say that we've obviously considered this very closely and that we are confident that when

it's all said and done we're going to have two results: we're going to have better governance due to more MHAs, possibly, doing the work of a department; and secondly, it's going to be cheaper because of removing the salary component and also it's going to be done within a pre-existing travel budget.

The other thing I would say too, when we're talking about travelling back and forth, people need to remember that if an MHA travels back and forth to their district or doing the work, there's one cost to it. It's not a case of getting paid twice or whatever else. If you travel back to your district – when I travel back to my district, I travel back as the Member for Burgeo – La Poile and not as the minister, but I understand.

The best thing about all this is everything is scrutinized, it's monitored and it's posted online after so that if there is the result that it's contrary to what we are saying here now, then the Member opposite will be the first one to stand and say you said this, this is what it resulted in. There have been a number of cases where Members on the opposite side, prior to those Members, have said what about the results. I can remember some debates I've had in here, ones that we filibustered, where the government said one thing and it turned out that the other thing happened.

I'm very comfortable standing here knowing that as Hansard records my words, I'm very comfortable knowing that this will have a positive effect. Certainly not just with no savings, there will be a savings when this is done, but with an improved government structure.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

CHAIR: The Chair recognizes the hon. Member for the District of Mount Pearl North.

MR. KENT: Were you guys banging on your desks for me that time?

AN HON. MEMBER: Oh yes.

MR. KENT: Oh, thank you.

CHAIR: I ask the hon. Member to address the Chair.

MR. KENT: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

You're a little edgy today, but I respect the important role you play in this House. A role that has a salary attached to it, I might add, unlike parliamentary secretaries moving forward – for now, says the Government House Leader.

AN HON. MEMBER: (Inaudible.)

MR. KENT: It wasn't meant to be hurtful at all.

CHAIR: I would ask the hon. Member, once again, to address the Chair, please.

MR. KENT: I would ask, Mr. Chair, for some protection from the Minister of Advanced Education and Skills, as charming as he is and as much as I enjoy our banter.

MR. BYRNE: Coming from you, that is a compliment.

MR. KENT: Thank you.

CHAIR: Order, please!

MR. KENT: Back to the matter at hand, Mr. Chair.

I appreciate the minister's comments. I understand where they're coming from. While he may say it's speculative, it's been clear through this debate that government does intend to appoint more parliamentary secretaries. That will have a cost. Will it come out of existing budget lines for ministerial travel? Well, yes, but those lines will be revised based on actual reality.

So all of a sudden, if you have – let's take the extreme case of a Labrador MHA. It costs more for a Labrador MHA to do their job. Their travel costs are far more significant than most Members on the Island portion of the province. If you have a Labrador MHA in a department as a parliamentary secretary – we have one now, I believe, if not two, one – that cost to the department is real. Whereas, if previous, just hypothetically, you had an MHA from the Northeast Avalon, well the cost implications for the department is far less.

Now, that said, there's also an implication for the House of Assembly budgets. If all of a sudden you have the vast majority of government MHAs either serving as ministers or as parliamentary secretaries, then I think the actual expenditures by MHAs that are covered under the House of Assembly will be reduced, I suspect.

I know just from watching reports in the past when people have served as parliamentary secretaries, it does have some impact. That's not a bad thing. I'm just acknowledging it does have impact. There is a cost of doing business. Even when the business is absolutely legitimate, there's a cost to that. That's the point I'm making.

Will it be a good thing? It may be a great thing. I'm not standing to speak negatively about this bill. That's not my intention. I just think it's important we have an opportunity, when debating legislation, to talk through implications.

The minister raises another good point. Our job is to hold government accountable, which we're working hard to do. On this point, we can look at the numbers in a year or 18 months or two years and look at the cost by department of those parliamentary secretaries relative to the House of Assembly budgets and see what the impact has been. Maybe it will be very minimal, but time will tell.

Related to all of that, there is just a concern about fairness and balance. I think through the Management Commission of this Legislature there may be an opportunity to address it if it becomes a concern. If you're a parliamentary secretary working on behalf of a minister, you can travel to and from your district to the department an infinite number of times, provided you have the minister's blessing and the minister's support to do so.

If you're not a parliamentary secretary and you're not a Cabinet minister, then you're restricted by the legislation that governs this House of Assembly and you have a set number of trips. You can travel as required when the House of Assembly is open, but for the numerous months of the year where this Chamber is not open, you really have to make

very careful decisions as a rural MHA about when you come to do work in the capital, in Confederation Building on behalf of your constituents or to meet with your caucus or to meet with some of your colleagues or to have a meeting with a minister. You only get so many trips.

The point I'm trying to make is there may become an issue of fairness and balance if a group of MHAs on the government side will have unlimited resources to do their work because of their role but MHAs on the Opposition side in particular, or MHAs on that side who are not fortunate enough to be appointed as parliamentary secretaries, I doubt there will be any left in that category but if there were, than there is a potential disadvantage. That's all I'm saying.

Is that a reason to vote against this bill? No, it's not a reason to vote against this bill. It's just one of those issues that we'll need to monitor together, we'll need to keep an eye on. Because whether you're a government MHA without position or whether you're an Opposition MHA without position, there is still that question of fairness and balance and you'll still want resources to be able to do your job, even if it's not work that is on behalf of a minister which would then be covered by a department.

I suspect some Members have some appreciation for the point I'm making. I don't oppose the change. I just think it's important that we be upfront, on the record about the implications and potential concerns. We'll see how things go.

If in the wisdom of the current Premier there is a decision made to appoint a dozen parliamentary secretaries, then so be it. I think it will be good for those MHAs. It may even be good for many of the departments that they'll be appointed to work with. But there is a cost implication and there may be a political implication around fairness and balance for those that are left. That's not an issue for government. That would be an issue we would need to deal with through the Management Commission. That's the responsibility of the House of Assembly.

Caucuses have limited resources; Opposition Parties certainly have very limited resources as we now know all too well. These things just

need to be considered, that's all I'm suggesting, Mr. Chair. I appreciate the opportunity to make a few comments on those issues today.

Thank you.

CHAIR: All those in favour?

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Aye.

CHAIR: Against?

Carried.

On motion, clause 1 carried.

CLERK: Clauses 2 through 4 inclusive.

CHAIR: Shall clauses 2 through 4 inclusive carry?

All those in favour?

Are you speaking on 2 through 4?

MR. KENT: Clauses 2 through 4.

CHAIR: The Chair recognizes the hon. the Member for the District of Mount Pearl North.

MR. KENT: Just one final question, Mr. Chair.

I'm just wondering, will this be the only election promise that the Liberals keep? I'm just wondering if perhaps the Government House Leader could comment on that.

Thank you.

CHAIR: The Chair recognizes the hon. the Government House Leader.

MR. A. PARSONS: We'll certainly be keeping lots of promises, but we have a big mess that was left to us that we need to fix first.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

CHAIR: Order, please!

All those in favour?

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Aye.

CHAIR: Against?

Carried.

On motion, clauses 2 through 4 carried.

CLERK: Be it enacted by the Lieutenant Governor and House of Assembly in Legislative Session convened, as follows.

CHAIR: Shall the enacting clause carry?

All those in favour?

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Aye.

CHAIR: Against?

Carried.

On motion, enacting clause carried.

CLERK: An Act To Amend The Parliamentary Assistant Act And The Parliamentary Secretaries Act.

CHAIR: Shall the long title carry?

All those in favour?

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Aye.

CHAIR: Against?

Carried.

On motion, title carried.

CHAIR: Shall I report the bill without amendment?

All those in favour?

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Aye.

CHAIR: Against?

Carried.

Motion, that the Committee report having passed the bill without amendment, carried.

CHAIR: The hon. the Government House Leader.

MR. A. PARSONS: Yes, I move, Mr. Chair, that the Committee rise and report Bill 3.

CHAIR: The motion is that the Committee rise and report Bill 3.

All those in favour?

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Aye.

CHAIR: Against?

On motion, that the Committee rise, report progress and ask leave to sit again, Mr. Speaker returned to the Chair.

MR. SPEAKER (Osborne): The hon. the Deputy Chair of Committees.

MR. LANE: Mr. Speaker, the Committee of the Whole have considered the matters to them referred and have directed me to report Bill 3 without amendment.

MR. SPEAKER: The Chair of Committees reports that the Committee have considered the matters to them referred and have directed him to report Bill 3, An Act To Amend The Parliamentary Assistant Act And The Parliamentary Secretaries Act, carried without amendment.

When shall the report be received?

MR. A. PARSONS: Now.

MR. SPEAKER: Now.

When shall the said bill be read a third time?

MR. A. PARSONS: Tomorrow.

MR. SPEAKER: Tomorrow.

On motion, report received and adopted. Bill ordered read a third time on tomorrow.

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Government House Leader.

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

Prior to moving to our next order of business, I would move pursuant to 16 and 17 on the Order

Paper, and pursuant to Standing Order 11, that the House do not adjourn at 5:30 p.m. today, Monday, May 9.

Further, pursuant to Standing Order 11 that the House not adjourn at 10 p.m. today, Monday, May 9.

I would now call from the Order Paper, Motion 1, the Budget Speech.

MR. SPEAKER: The hon. the Member for Labrador West.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. LETTO: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I rise again today to have a discussion on the budget that's before us. First of all, I would like to refer back to the Budget Speech that was presented by the Minister of Finance in this House on April 14, and some of the reasons why we had to do what we had to do in this budget.

First of all, on the very first page of the Budget Speech it said, "On December 22, 2015, armed with the most current fiscal and economic information we had available, we told the people of the province that the fiscal situation of the province was worse than the \$1.1 billion deficit budgeted and that the forecasted deficit for 2015-16 could be almost \$2 billion."

AN HON. MEMBER: How much?

MR. LETTO: Well, we said at that time it could be \$2 billion, but we all know that come budget day that anticipated deficit would be in the range of \$2.7 billion.

One of the things that we did post-December, and going into January, was decided we would go to the people of the province with the Government Renewal Initiative. We had several presentations from people around the province. We had 26 in-person sessions. We had 1,000-plus session participants. We had 28,000 dialogue app users, and 700 email, mail, fax and phone submissions – which I think was a good representation from the province. We heard loud and clear what the people of the province expected of us on how we would address the

\$2.7 billion deficit that was looming in front of us.

On budget day, the minister did outline some of the things we found from these consultations. One of the first things the people of the province told us to do was act now, don't delay – which is what we did – because the people of the province realized the situation we had faced. The second thing they told us to do was have the guts to make tough decisions. Have the guts to make tough decisions. Now, we know that the Cabinet, the Treasury Board and everybody who was involved in putting this budget together were faced with some very tough decisions, and they had the wisdom and the foresight to make them.

We've heard from across the way and we've heard it all through the day in the bill that we put forward on the parliamentary secretaries: They're finally making one promise, or they're finally keeping one promise that they made. Well, guess what the people of the province told us to do, and it's in the budget? Don't be restricted by promises made during the election. So the people of the province, they know we're facing this terrible situation and they know we have to make the tough decisions, and they know that it's in the best interest of the province in the long run.

Another thing they told us was leave politics out of decision making. Again, we've done that. Stop waste, treat money as if it were your own. I think the minister has made it quite clear that this budget contains some very tough decisions, and the Premier has said it as well. So our job, as a government, is to listen to those ideas, provide the evidence to support our actions and act. That's exactly what we've done, Madam Speaker.

We understand many of those actions have upset many people. We weren't happy to make them. No more than they were, but we have to do what's in the best interest of the province. That's why we made those decisions.

Now, I have to go back because I'm really amazed and astounded at – whatever you want to call it, rhetoric – some of the comments from the Opposition, especially during Question Period today and again on Thursday.

I lived on the Labrador Straits. I was born on the Labrador Straits. I moved to Labrador West in 1973. I've spent my whole time growing up next to the Quebec border and how important is it to have a good transportation link through Quebec and to the other parts of the province. I'm really amazed and disappointed, really, that the Opposition has shown so much opposition to the fact we're going to spend \$750,000 to update the feasibility study on the fixed link across the Strait of Belle Isle.

AN HON. MEMBER: It's a pre-feasibility.

MR. LETTO: The pre-feasibility which was carried out, by the way, by the previous administration. I guess once they got the study done, they had figured they had fulfilled their commitment to the people of the province.

I think we've missed a great opportunity, by the way, for this fixed link and that's with the Muskrat Falls Project, as many people do similarly believe. That was the prime opportunity to do the fixed link with the Muskrat Falls Project, but that didn't happen so we've to live with that.

One of the other things they talked about across the way is the fact that we have no diversification plan in our budget. There's nothing there to stimulate the economy. There's nothing there to create new opportunities. Well, I cannot think of a better project for this province that would create economic opportunities, do diversification, than a fixed link across the Strait of Belle Isle.

MR. K. PARSONS: (Inaudible.)

MR. LETTO: Well, let me tell you how it diversifies the economy, I say to the Member for Cape St. Francis, because that's the problem here. The people of certain parts of the province don't understand the implications that a fixed link would have on this province.

I say to the Member opposite I've had several conversations with my colleague, the Minister of BTCRD on this, and what that project would mean to the Northern Peninsula – which right now is an economically depressed area of the province, we all admit that – what it would mean to Labrador, what it would mean to the fishing

industry, what it would mean to manufacturing and getting goods and services to market. The transportation of goods – having good transportation infrastructure and a good transportation network is very important to the economy of any province, especially when you live on an island. And we are living on an island.

Not all of us, but many of us. The majority of us live on an island. We're only 27,000 strong in Labrador, but we're strong – we may be only 27,000 strong, but we're mighty. We have the resources to keep this Island afloat, let me add.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. LETTO: So having good transportation technology and infrastructure is very, very important.

I talked to a couple of mayors on the weekend, several mayors actually. I'm going to just mention a couple because I told them what was happening, what the Opposition was bringing up in Question Period on Thursday about the fixed link. I talked to the Mayor of St. Anthony by the way.

AN HON. MEMBER: What a mayor.

MR. LETTO: What a mayor. I told him and he couldn't believe it. This mayor has been advocating for a fixed link for years.

I talked to the Mayor of L'Anse au Clair, which is, by the way, probably the strongest advocate this province has ever had for – or one of the strongest certainly for a fixed link. I tell you, the Mayor for Blanc-Sablon, Quebec wasn't there. Mayor Armand Joncas is also very supportive. This is not just a Newfoundland and Labrador project, Madam Speaker; this is a Canadian project.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. LETTO: This is the final phase of creating the Canadian unity from coast to coast to coast. This is not just a Newfoundland and Labrador initiative. I'm sure if we were to proceed with this that the federal government would be a major player.

I don't know if everybody in this House has heard of the coalition called the neighbours without borders, which consists of the Mayor of St. Anthony, the Mayor of L'Anse au Clair and all the mayors on the Northern Peninsula and the South Coast of Labrador, as well as the North Shore of Quebec. Now we all know we're not living in a fantasy land. We all know that this project is a major project.

When you look at it, the prefeasibility study that was done by the previous administration said that a bored tunnel across the Strait of Belle Isle would be about \$1.2 billion. When you look at the Muskrat Falls Project and where that cost is today, where are we? It's a sad situation that the opportunity was missed.

I was reading today a bit about it. It was done in 1978, the report of Commission of Inquiry into Newfoundland and Labrador's Transportation called the Sullivan Commission. They even recommended in 1978 that a fixed link across the Strait of Belle Isle is very important to the future of this province. That was in 1978.

AN HON. MEMBER: (Inaudible).

MR. LETTO: Well, I don't know, it is just the Sullivan Commission.

We all know, as well, that in the prefeasibility study done by Hatch Mott MacDonald for the previous administration, it also recommended that this would be a project that should be considered.

For the Opposition to get up and try to tie such a great project and an important project to the people of Newfoundland and Labrador to the decisions we're making in the budget with regard to cutting of education, the health care and all this in Labrador, it is shameful. It is nothing short of shameful. Because this project is important to the people of Labrador. It's important to the people of the province and it's important to the people of Canada.

Instead of trying to tear it down, we should be looking at ways to try to get this project moving. It is shameful that the Members of the Opposition would even question the Premier and the Finance Minister on their decision to put

money into this budget to update that prefeasibility study. I say shameful!

We are the last province in Canada with no road connection to the rest of Canada. Some people will say, talking about: well, that would take away from Port aux Basques, Marine Atlantic. Well, Madam Speaker, I beg to differ. I beg to differ because it was only in the 1990s that we did a study – we being the Combined Councils of Labrador – on having the circle route and what that would do for tourism and what that would do for the movement of goods and services.

It wouldn't deter from Channel-Port aux Basques or Marine Atlantic or the North Sydney run. In fact, it would enhance it because more people would come and have better access. The last thing a tourist wants to do is to retrace his or her tracks. They want to come in one way; they want to go out another. We all do it. So for that argument to be used, to me, is not substantial.

Again, I will say this project is something we should all be considering. If and when the time is right and the fiscal situation is right, it's a project we should proceed with.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

MR. LETTO: Now, Madam Speaker, this past weekend, as the Member opposite referred to, I attended the Municipalities Newfoundland and Labrador Municipal Symposium. I talked to many mayors. We all heard some of the things today.

Yes, many mayors and councils around the province have concerns about this budget. Yes, they do, but we all do. We all have concerns. People on this side of the House have concerns, but I can tell you, the discussions that went on this weekend around municipalities and the fact that this budget is supporting and enhancing the community sustainability plan that has been implemented for municipalities is a good thing.

They appreciate the fact that we have not cut Municipal Operating Grants. We have not diminished or decreased the cost-sharing ratios with municipalities, whether it's 90-10, 80-20 or 70-30. We will continue to give them a share of the gas tax, a share of the HST.

One of the things I would like to have a few comments on today is the discussion we had around the Premier's commitment in his mandate letter, and the mandate letter of the Minister of Municipal Affairs, is to hold a Premier's forum in conjunction with the next Municipalities Newfoundland and Labrador annual general meeting.

We were pleased to announce this weekend that this Premier's forum will take place on October 5, 2016, in St. John's. We went through a process at the symposium this weekend of what topics would be used for the Premier's forum and who would attend.

They were very receptive to the idea and the fact that members of the MNL Board of Directors will be in attendance, as well as four delegates chosen by the regions, from each of the regions of the province, for a total of 35 to 40 people in attendance. It is going to be a day-long event and the Premier did send a video recording to show his support of the event.

It was very well received by the members in attendance from MNL and it is something that we're going to –

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Oh, oh!

MADAM SPEAKER (Dempster): Order, please!

MR. LETTO: – proceed with and it shows our commitment to municipalities.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Oh, oh!

MADAM SPEAKER: Order, please!

MR. LETTO: Because we believe in strong municipal entities in this province. We believe in the work that mayors and councillors do for us. Strong communities will make a strong province and we want to build on that foundation. We know they have their challenges, but we also know that we need them to be strong and sustainable and we will do everything as a government to make sure that happens.

Before I sit down, I just want to have a few more words on mining. As you know, mining is a very important part of Labrador, whether you're

talking about iron ore in the west, whether you're talking about the nickel, cobalt, copper in Voisey's Bay, whether you're talking about the rare earth minerals in Northern Labrador and in Southern Labrador, uranium in Northern Labrador.

We know the potential that is there in mining, and this government sees that potential. We know that in order for these projects to move ahead, and some of these projects are still in their infancy stage, that we need strong exploration. That's why we have increased, in this budget by the way, the grants that we would issue to exploration companies or individuals to develop those resources or at least to explore those resources and bring them to a development stage.

Yes, we all know that there are difficult things in this budget. We all know that. We all accept that fact, but we also know – at least this side of the House knows and a lot of people in the province know as well that there are good things in this budget. When it comes to the municipalities, yes, they have some concerns, but to maintain the Community Sustainability Partnership as it was I think it's a major accomplishment. It shows our commitment to Municipalities Newfoundland and Labrador.

I've had several conversations with mayors and councillors this past week and they understand. Who knows better of the importance of budgeting than municipalities? Who knows better? Municipalities – they have to bring in a balanced budget. Imagine if we as a provincial government had to bring in a balanced budget, what we would be facing. They're balanced budgets. Who knows better than municipal leaders what it takes to create a good budget?

Madam Speaker, my time is up. I certainly appreciate the fact that I've had another opportunity.

MADAM SPEAKER: Order, please!

MR. LETTO: Again I will close by saying shame on the Opposition.

MADAM SPEAKER: Order, please!

MR. LETTO: Shame on the Opposition for –

MADAM SPEAKER: I remind the hon. Member his time for speaking has expired.

MR. LETTO: – turning down and for opposing the fixed link to Labrador. It's shameful.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Hear, hear!

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Oh, oh!

MADAM SPEAKER: Order, please!

Given the hour of the day, this House now stands in recess until 7 o'clock.