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DEBATES
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PROCEEDINGS

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MANITOBA LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
Fortieth Legislature

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LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF MANITOBA

Thursday, March 27, 2014

The House met at 10 a.m.

Mr. Speaker: O Eternal and Almighty God, from Whom all power and wisdom come, we are assembled here before Thee to frame such laws as may tend to the welfare and prosperity of our province. Grant, O merciful God, we pray Thee, that we may desire only that which is in accordance with Thy will, that we may seek it with wisdom and know it with certainty and accomplish it perfectly for the glory and honour of Thy name and for the welfare of all our people. Amen.

Good morning, everyone. Please be seated.

ORDERS OF THE DAY

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

SECOND READINGS—PUBLIC BILLS

Mr. Speaker: Are we ready to proceed with Bill 201? [*Agreed*]

Bill 201—The Family Maintenance Amendment and Garnishment Amendment Act

Mr. Speaker: All right. We'll call Bill 201, The Family Maintenance Amendment and Garnishment Amendment Act.

Mr. Blaine Pedersen (Midland): I move, seconded by the member for Steinbach (Mr. Goertzen), that Bill 201, The Family Maintenance Amendment and Garnishment Amendment Act, be now read a second time and referred to a committee of this House.

Motion presented.

Mr. Pedersen: Mr. Speaker, and I'm feeling third time lucky this morning. This bill was introduced in the last session, and it was debated when it was introduced. It was debated again during the last session. And now it's being reintroduced again. So I am sure the government is going to see its way through to support this bill this morning, and so we can move it on to committee and make some somewhat minor but really substantive changes at the same time to help our citizens of this province.

And this bill came about as a result of a constituent of mine coming to her—and, again, I'll just refresh the House's memory on this—is where—a divorce case, and as—what happens quite often—it was a rather bitter divorce. And it went to court. The

settlement was made. The judge decided on a settlement for it in terms of support and custody. There was a couple—there is a couple of children involved.

And then, after this settlement was rendered, the ex-husband appealed the case. He was not happy with it. He wanted to go back to court and try to get the settlement changed. And on the second go around, it—the judge kept the same settlement terms. There was no changes in the settlement that was agreed to from—in the first place. Really, the only change that happened is that the judge decided the husband, in this case, should pay his ex-wife's legal costs for the appeal, which were in the range of \$15,000. And obviously this was a financial burden on her, having this \$15,000 legal bill. She did not ask for it, but it was—she felt that she had to do this. And so she had this bill of \$15,000 in legal costs.

Now, the judge, in his decision on the appeal, said that he, the ex-husband, was to pay his ex-wife's legal bills of \$15,000 for the appeal case. And—but he refused to do that. The ex-husband refused to do that. So—and now her only option to retain—or to get back her \$15,000 in legal costs would have been to sue her ex-husband. And of course this would cost her even more. She had to remortgage her house in order to pay for this legal bill of \$15,000, so she was in—certainly in no position to pay for any further legal costs in trying to recover this—these legal costs.

So what this bill does, Bill 201, is to give the judge in a divorce case the discretion, the ability, to move this to Maintenance Enforcement if there is not restitution paid on the judge's orders. This bill already builds in a six-month waiting period so that hopefully there would be a settlement of any outstanding costs between them. But if in the end, in six months, that there is no settlement—in this case, it would be settlement of paying for her legal costs—then it can be moved to Maintenance Enforcement.

And, of course, every divorce case is different. There is—it has to be treated—it has to be set up in a way that the judge has the discretion of doing this. This would not mean the judge has to do this, but based on the judge's interpretation of the case before them, that they could make this decision to have this settlement imposed. Right now, it is a matter of who has the—perhaps, the deepest pockets or the

biggest amount of resentment. And that's—families suffer through enough in any divorce case, so we trying to look for some method of helping them.

And, you know, if this bill—when this bill—I'll be optimistic—when this bill is approved and passed, then if you were looking at this situation in itself, it would be a case where the ex-husband's lawyer would be advising that person that, you know, if you lose this, you could be on—you will have to pay legal costs. Right now, it's not clear at all that there will be any enforcement of having to repay that, other than going back to court again. So it does—it will give the courts, give families another avenue for being able to work through the divorce case and—so that they can reach settlement in terms of their families and allow life to go on.

* (10:10)

And, of course, Maintenance Enforcement Program, very good program. It is very busy. It—we don't want to impose extra work on Maintenance Enforcement, and that by having just this option put in there, it allows the court system—the judges are very aware of the Maintenance Enforcement Program and the challenges that they face. So it is not necessarily going to create an extra burden for them, and knowing, too, that sometimes when things are—extra costs are put on Maintenance Enforcement, it has its own ripple effect on there.

So this is something that the court system can work through, and just in order to allow families to get through this traumatic time and have life proceed for them, and without the bitterness that comes—we see quite often in divorce cases that can cause extra legal costs and—to a system that's already tied up. And when you look at the legal system and the court system, they are backed up enough now. There's no shortage of cases going to court. So if a small adjustment to the maintenance enforcement act can be done in a bill like this, it may—and perhaps actually help to alleviate the court system in some small ways.

And so, Mr. Speaker, I would certainly like the government to seriously consider this. We—I have talked to the Justice Minister about this and he indicated some support, some reservations. And, certainly, if he has any minor changes to it, I am always more than open to changes. But the goal is here is to help families in Manitoba and that—this is what this bill is all about, is trying to get families through a rather traumatic time in their lives, and any

way we can help them to get through that is always beneficial.

So, Mr. Speaker, I certainly hope the government sees fit to support this bill, and we can move it on to committee and hear from people that would have input into this and feel—either supporting or suggesting even more changes to it.

So with that, Mr. Speaker, I look forward to the government's reply. Thank you.

Hon. Andrew Swan (Minister of Justice and Attorney General): It's a pleasure to speak to Bill 201, and I do thank the member for Midland (Mr. Pedersen) for bringing this bill forward and for his comments this morning. I have listened very carefully the last time he spoke on the bill and also this morning as we, I believe, work together to try and find ways to reduce some of the conflict that exists in the family law system.

I know I said this last time I spoke to the bill, but I'll say it again, that I believe the member for Midland has brought this bill forward in good faith. We do sometimes have situations where constituents come with problems that are fairly challenging and represent a major issue for the constituent. And I again want to say that I know the member's brought this forward in good faith.

And today I listened carefully to what the member had to say and I—perhaps from the discussions we've had where we're moving this along a little further—last time we were speaking about this bill, it was mainly just about, well, we should help people collect costs that have been awarded in a family law case. And I did hear the member go a little bit beyond that this morning to really talk about this potentially being part of a bigger way that we can reduce the overall amount of conflict in the family law system.

Certainly, there are some things we can do to assist people once there's an order of costs that's been made, but I think what we really want to do is to take a look at the bigger picture to see what we are doing and what we can do better to try and reduce cases from actually going to a contested hearing where people spend a lot of money and, in most cases, do not wind up with any agreement that's better for themselves or, most importantly, for their children.

And this is very important in the area of family law. High-conflict cases continue to take up a large amount of the time that's spent in court and, frankly, a lot of money that people are prepared to spend,

which I think we can all agree—even having been someone who practised family law for many years—I think we can agree that money would be better spent for the benefit of children.

So I believe now that what the member is talking about is trying to find a way to encourage more people to settle their differences, to settle their disputes short of a formal court hearing, whether that's by way of an agreement or whether that's by way of a consent order. And I—what I heard this morning that I hadn't heard before was the member acknowledging that, yes, maybe this is a tool, then, that lawyers can use to try and convince their clients who may not be so quick to respond to their advice, or, in a different way, judges at a pretrial conference or case conference, to give people a little bit more reason to listen to reasonable offers to settle.

There's a number of measures that are already in place to reduce conflict within the system, but I think we can look at some ways to expand that. The first, of course, is the For the Sake of the Children program. This is a mandatory parent education program that's offered in Manitoba. It used to be voluntary. We decided several years ago to make the investments and to make it the law in Manitoba that unless there is a—well, actually For the Sake of the Children program, it is mandatory when there are children—issues involving children, to have people go receive some information, not with the ex-spouse in the room but with others going through the same thing, to gather information on how they can best deal with the other parent, how they can best deal with the children—who we know are going through difficult times—when a marriage breaks down, and even how they can deal with the extended family, the neighbours, teachers, others in the community, to help make a difficult time as normal as possible for children. And I'm pleased this program is now mandatory and it continues to be free. It's available throughout the province of Manitoba for parents who are going through separation.

I'm very pleased, a few years ago, we were able to pilot what's called the First Choice program involving Family Conciliation Services. The First Choice program is actually a program we adopted out of Minnesota that provides a two-person team to sit down with the two parties to the case, to give sort of an upfront, rough view of what would likely happen if the case was to go to a contested hearing. The First Choice program has been very successful at resolving, in some cases, all of the issues; the custody issues and access issues, the money issues as

well, in some cases, at the very least narrowing the issues that need to be dealt with. Again, that is a program that's offered free to any parties in the province of Manitoba through the family conciliation office.

There is also mediation that is offered to Manitoba families wherever in the province they may be. Mediation, of course, only works if both parties are prepared to go. So although mediation can be strongly suggested by lawyers, by judges, others, the parties need to agree. We appreciate there's some cases where a direct mediation is not the right thing, where there's a power imbalance. But mediation services is ready, willing and able to assist families generally in sorting out the custody and access issues, not purely the support issues. But, again, that has been quite successful.

We know that in some cases the greatest potential for conflict happens when children are being passed from the care of one parent to the other. And the transitions—from my experience as a family lawyer, those transitions are difficult for children. For some of the most difficult cases in Winnipeg, we have the Winnipeg Children's Access Agency. In Brandon, we have the—I believe, the friendship centre handles those transfers. This is another free service that's provided to parents to minimize conflict to try and stabilize things for children.

Sometimes it's not possible to resolve those cases through mediation. There are some other things that are available in the province of Manitoba which stand head and shoulders above every other province in providing means to allow people to get to a resolution short of a contested hearing. The family conciliation office can provide assessment reports. If people have a—really a great divide in terms of how the separation of time should go, mediation can go in and do an assessment report and have somebody meet with the parties, meet with the children, meet with the other people in the community that are important to the children, to try to come up with a recommendation on what should happen. Many times those mediation reports or assessment reports, which again are free of charge to Manitoba families, lead to an early resolution of some or all of the cases.

Where a judge believes it's appropriate, a judge can order a quick consultation, which is really a mini assessment report, which gets Family Conciliation Services involved very quickly. And, in fact, Mr. Speaker, it's possible to get a report back in those cases within 30 days so the parties can then make

some more informed decisions, judges sometimes can give more informed advice and direction to people, and their lawyers can provide them with better advice.

* (10:20)

And, of course, in Manitoba now, every case that goes through the Queen's Bench system is case managed. What that means is that every case, before it goes to the contested hearing the member for Midland (Mr. Pedersen) was talking about, that case now has to go in front of a judge who will not be hearing the contested case. And that judge will meet with the parties and their lawyers; that judge will look at the information and will give the parties a very brief but meaningful view of what they believe will happen if the case actually goes to a contested hearing.

It is time consuming. There is no question that judges in the family court are busy. Much of it now, happily, is spent on case conferences and pretrial conferences and less and less is spent in contested trials and in contested motions.

One of the other pieces, which I know ties in directly to what the member for Midland is talking about, is that the court rules provide for something called an offer to settle. And if one of the litigants is quite certain that they are making a reasonable offer to the other side, their lawyer can actually turn that into a formal offer to settle. And the lawyer on the other side—or, if unrepresented, the party then has to consider the chances of doing better than that offer to settle. And if at the end of the contested case, for example, somebody's offer for child support is more than the amount that was ordered by the judge, that party's lawyer can then stand up and say to the judge, m'Lord, you should know that my client offered to pay \$1,000 a month. You've ordered \$800 a month. There actually should be an order of costs against the other side, even though they were the successful party in getting support, because they did not accept an offer to settle. And that's a very real example, which is not addressed in the bill that the member has brought forward.

We think that if we're going to use the Maintenance Enforcement system as an additional lever on top of all the other things that I've spoken about to reduce conflict, it should work both ways. And it should encourage parties to fully appreciate what may happen if it goes to court, to fully appreciate the impact of an offer to settle, and we

believe that perhaps we can go beyond what the member's suggesting, that perhaps there's other tools we can use to keep reducing the amount of conflict in family law in Manitoba and get better results.

So, again, I believe the member has brought this forward in good faith. I think the member has gone a bit further to understand that there are more things we can do to reduce conflict across the system. There's a good idea in here which I think could be part of a bigger and more impressive way to reduce conflict in family law in Manitoba.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Kelvin Goertzen (Steinbach): Good morning, Mr. Speaker. I listened to the words from my colleague from Midland and the Attorney General (Mr. Swan). Disappointed that the Attorney General doesn't seem to be indicating this morning that they'll support this legislation.

It's not as though the member for Midland has sprung the legislation on the government as a surprise. Sometimes, we do play games of ambush in this House where there's not always great notice on things. There has been months of notice on this bill. It's been introduced two or three times in the Chamber, been debated several times here, and yet the Attorney General is still saying the same things that he said several months ago. It's as though it's the first time he's seen it. He continues to say it's a good idea and it might be something that's part of a broader sort of reform, and yet it's a good idea that sits on the shelf, and it's been sitting there for a long time instead of actually being out there to serve those who might need it.

It's not revolutionary. It's not going to reform the family law system. There are many things within the family law system that need to be changed. There's no doubt about that. And I think sometimes—and I'll take my share of responsibility for it—that the issue of family law doesn't get debated often enough here in the Legislature. We don't often have enough of the kinds of ideas of reform that are brought forward on family law, because it is a very important part of the legal system and one of the more difficult parts, as raised already by the member for Midland. It is an emotional time for almost anybody who is involved in any aspect of family law. Often, it's a very contentious time. And it's a difficult area of law for all of those who are either practising, involved as litigants, or those who are involved in trying to come to some sort of a resolution on the dispute.

So this is not a measure that's intended to make all of those things go away. We only wish that there was something that could make all of that go away. I appreciate the Attorney General's (Mr. Swan) comments on trying to find other means to not have to have individuals go to court to deal with family law issues. That would be ideal, and I would certainly support initiatives that would work to try to ensure that people could come to a resolution before they get to court, because generally, in most cases, particularly if you're just simply dealing with a settlement agreement, nobody wins when they end up going to court, because ultimately, a lot of that gets dealt away in legal fees. A lot of it gets dealt away in time and acrimony between the two parties, and if there was a way to have a settlement before they went to court, it would benefit everybody. It would benefit our legal system because it would take—it wouldn't have so much resources being used on the legal system.

And I have some ideas around that as well, Mr. Speaker. Perhaps the Attorney General and I can have those discussions at some time in the future, but here is a suggestion that isn't intended to be a cure-all. We're not going to find a cure-all, but it's a step in the right direction. The Attorney General himself acknowledges that, that this is something that could be helpful, that we could ensure that those who are having a difficult time getting the legal costs that are assigned to them and awarded to them paid.

Now I think there's probably a bigger issue at play here. I think the bigger issue is that maintenance enforcement itself has a lot of issues. Certainly, we know that those who are involved within the Maintenance Enforcement Program now have a difficult time often getting a hold of the person who's responsible for their case, getting a resolution, getting an answer.

So perhaps the Attorney General's reluctance isn't so much on the idea of ensuring that you could recoup your legal costs through the Maintenance Enforcement Program. Maybe it's a tacit recognition and admission that the maintenance enforcement system itself is under such overwhelming stress that it couldn't even take on another small measure.

Now I don't think the solution to that is to not accept a piece of legislation like this, Mr. Speaker. If everybody agrees, and I don't think I'm going to hear anybody in this Chamber suggest that it's not a good idea, then why do we sit around for months and

months and not allow it to go forward, other than perhaps the system isn't ready for it to go forward.

Now if that is the case, if the Attorney General wants to stand up and say that the Maintenance Enforcement Program is so overburdened as it is, that it simply couldn't take on one more thing on the system, well, that's a different discussion and that's a different argument.

And if he wants to put that forward as the reason why his government isn't willing to proceed with something it agrees is a good idea, well, then, he should do that. And we can have that discussion and maybe we can have some ideas about how to improve the Maintenance Enforcement Program as it 'extends' now so it could take on other sorts of initiatives to help those who are involved within the Maintenance Enforcement Program. But I've not heard that from him.

What I'm hearing from him is that he likes the idea, he thinks it has merit, but he'd like it to be part of some other overwhelming grand package that we've not seen or had any indication when it might come forward. Well, I look forward to the day when that package comes forward, and I hope that it's something that's going to be positive and that can ultimately be supported by all members of the House. But I don't think that we need to make the perfect be the enemy of the good. I think that we could—if there's something that's good here, Mr. Speaker, and we can advance it, then why wouldn't we advance it, instead of waiting for the perfect solution, which he seems to be waiting for, which I don't think's going to come.

So this is a good idea. It's something that the government's had months and months and months to consider. It's something everybody agrees would be something that would be a step forward. Everybody understands it wouldn't be revolutionary. It's not going to turn the justice system on its head, Mr. Speaker. It is just a simple step to ensure that those who are already in difficult situations and trying to get the money that's been awarded to them via Justice can get that money awarded to them through the Maintenance Enforcement Program.

So I certainly hope that the Attorney General will reconsider. I—my hope is that this isn't one of those issues where—and it happens sometimes in the Legislature where the government is reluctant to pass a private member's bill because they feel in some way it will give credit to members on the opposition. Now, I'm not laying that charge against the

government. I am suggesting that that sometimes happens here in the Legislature, but I'm trying to search for a reason why it is that the government would be reluctant to pass something that they acknowledge is a good idea.

If it's not the issue of Maintenance Enforcement Program already being overburdened, although I suspect it could be that, perhaps it is a political issue and the government just doesn't want to pass a good idea because it wasn't their good idea.

My hope would be we could rise above both of those challenges. We could come up with solutions within the Maintenance Enforcement Program. Or we could rise above petty politics, and pass a bill that is going to benefit those—because, you know, I don't think people are going to be running around the court system and the family law system saying, oh, that, you know, this—now that we can get our legal fees and recoup through the MEP program, that was a Tory idea or that was a New Democratic idea or that was a Liberal idea. I don't think people operate their lives that way. I don't know that they would know whose idea it was, and frankly they probably wouldn't care whose idea it was. They would be just happy that they could actually get something done, Mr. Speaker.

* (10:30)

And that's how Manitobans should respond to things. They should be able to have legislation that works for them, when they are in a situation that they need it to work for, and not sit around and worry about it—about who actually brought forward the idea.

So if Manitobans can rise above that sort of partisan petty politics, I hope that this government could rise above it as well here this morning. Pass this bill on to committee. If there are amendments that need to come forward, if the Attorney General (Mr. Swan) has ideas for some amendments to the bill, we're open to amendments. We've never said that anybody has a monopoly on good ideas. In fact, we've always said the opposite—that there's no bill that can't be improved, and there's no bill that can't be strengthened, and if that applies to this bill, then let's strengthen it and make it a little bit better.

But let's not, again, let the good be the enemy of the—or the perfect be the enemy of the good. Let's move this forward. Let's have the discussion in

committee. Let's improve the bill and let's improve the lives of those who are already in very, very difficult situations and not sit around and play petty politics with a bill that shouldn't be hung up because of that, Mr. Speaker. Thank you very much.

Mr. Dave Gaudreau (St. Norbert): I think that the member for Steinbach (Mr. Goertzen) had some good points about how, you know, the member for Midland's (Mr. Pedersen) bill is definitely something that we're interested in looking at, and I know that the Attorney General would be very interested in talking to him some more about it.

It does propose some significant changes to the way the maintenance enforcement act would work.

And, you know, we've done a lot of really good things to this—to the Maintenance Enforcement department. First of all, we fund them. The members opposite have already put on record their plan. I mean, we don't know which one because two—a year ago, it was 2 per cent cuts across the board, so that would limit their ability to do their job, and now they're saying it would be 1 per cent cuts, which would further limit Maintenance Enforcement to do their job.

I know that the member opposite was speaking kind of poorly about the Maintenance Enforcement department. I've got a different view on it because I went through with my current wife—her ex, we had some issues with him, and Maintenance Enforcement—and they were fantastic to us. They—he'd moved to Alberta, and he had—we had to get a garnishment order on him, and they helped us with that, and then they also furthered the process when he didn't want to pay, and he was—you know, not complying with the order. They suspended his licence, and it's amazing how fast—when you do that—somebody will all of a sudden cough up the money, and things ran tickety-boo again and he got his licence back and away we went.

So I really value the people from Maintenance Enforcement. I think they do a fantastic job. I mean, you know, yes, there's frustrations when you're going through all of these things, but you know what, they were good to us, and they were really—they were great to work with, and they did a really good job in our case and in many cases. I mean, I have constituents who talk about how great they've been treated by the—that department. And surely, cutting them isn't the answer.

So, you know, that's why we fund them. And we're not cutting. And that's a really important thing to remember—that we're not cutting that.

Now I heard the member for Steinbach (Mr. Goertzen) talking about the credit for bills. I don't think that it's about that, Mr. Speaker. I know that we've passed a lot of their bills. When they come forward and they have merit, we'll pass them. We'll look at them and pass them and work with them. And I'm not saying this bill doesn't have merit. What we're saying is that they could work with the Attorney General (Mr. Swan) because there is significant changes. So he's willing to sit down and discuss how this could be presented, and it shouldn't be just rushed into because of the changes that's going to be done. And, you know, the member for Midland (Mr. Pedersen) can go down the hall and meet with the Attorney General on this.

I would like to just touch back on the for sake of the children program, which was in when we came in, but what we did is we made it mandatory for every family. So when families get—with children—get divorced or separated and they get to go through this program. Now, I, myself, Mr. Speaker, have taken the program when I went through my divorce, and it was a really eye-opening, great program. Now we didn't have a contentious divorce; we just agreed to split, and we went through the program, and both of us benefited from it. But you know who benefited the most is the children, because our child didn't have the two parents using him as the wedge issue in the middle.

So I think that it's really important that we note that we've actually supported this program and that we've made it mandatory and that it's helping families all over the province with knowing that the child is the thing that comes first in the relationship. So it's a really important thing to note.

I mean, we look at the cuts being proposed from the opposition, and what would happen to that program? You can't run the program with cuts. I know that every time we bring up where they're going to cut, they say, well, it wouldn't be that program, and it wouldn't be that program, and it wouldn't be that program. Well, eventually what program are they going to cut if it wouldn't be any of the programs that we run? Because we run lots of them, and they're saying that they wouldn't cut any of those, but yet they're going to cut 1 per cent across the board. So this program would be impacted, there's no doubt in my mind, by the cuts across the

aisle there and, you know, it would make it more difficult for families and for women to access the services that they need because usually it's more of the women that end up having to try to get the orders against the husband or the ex in this—in these situations, and we don't want that. We want them to have access to everything that they can possibly access in all the help that's available to them.

So I think that it's really important that we talk about the differences in policy because the deep cuts can't come without a price. We can talk about them, and that's their decision. They talk about them. We don't, we fund them. We fund the departments. But if they want to talk about cuts, I mean, that's going to have a deep price and, you know, when the Leader of the Opposition was in power they cut the universal child tax benefit, so roughly \$533 a month from children.

So they're talking about supporting children in one hand, and then they're talking about cutting them in another. So—I mean, I'd kind of like to see exactly where they're coming from, and I think the member for Midland has the opportunity to sit down with the Attorney General and discuss the bill further and see if there's anything that can be worked out. I mean we're totally amenable to that. You know, the Attorney General came over and told me himself that—he said, you know, he'd sit down and talk about it, but it would be a huge change.

And, you know, we've also made a lot of changes that allow us to track people who fail to pay their spousal support and garnish their wages. It's like I was speaking in my case, but I know that it's become an issue that we've taken on and that we've—we're working with Maintenance Enforcement and we're spending less time processing routine payments and more time going after people who are not living up to their responsibilities, and you can't do that unless you fund the department properly. And those fine people that work in that department, they need the resources and, quite frankly, cutting isn't the answer to helping families in Manitoba and helping those people who are in most need of this service. So I think that, you know, we have to talk about that on both sides. You can't have one without the other.

And in 2004 we passed legislation that enabled the Maintenance Enforcement Program to deal with extra-provincial garnishing orders and—like, in my case, or in my wife's case now—you know, they were able to deal directly with Alberta. And it was a very good reciprocal agreement and Alberta dealt with it

on their end, and it really helped us out. So that—those kinds of things are how we are—have been dealing with this system and helping it smooth—work better and smoother.

In 2010 we passed changes to enable the implementation of the new computer system. Once again, those things have those resources to enable these fine folks to do their jobs, have a cost to them. And if you're running around cutting half a billion dollars from the budget and you're not supplying them with the computers and with the manpower that they need, how are we supposed to continue on with the program? So you can put all these legislative changes in place, but if there's nobody there to actually do the work and if they don't have the tools to do the work, then how is that work going to get done? So it's one thing to talk about it, but it's another thing to actually put your money where your mouth is, I guess, is the saying, and we've done that. We've funded the department. We made sure that they have the tools that they need to do it. We support them and, you know, we also work on other programs, Mediation Services, for example. You know, you don't have to necessarily go to court. You can get to the Mediation Services and you can get people to agree to each other—to work with each other. You don't have to go to court.

Our case, in my case, I didn't—we didn't go to court. We made an agreement. We settled it all out of court and it didn't have to go that route. And Mediation Services is a really important aspect of that, where people can access that and they can, if it's an amenable situation, they can talk about it and they can work together. And also, in all that, the winners are the children, because in the end, if you're spending thousands of dollars on lawyers' fees, the lawyers win and the children end up losing out because they're not getting the—all of the things that they need in life because their parents are spending all the money on legal bills. So, you know, we do support that.

* (10:40)

And we also have the First Choice program, which is a dispute resolution to help parents resolve custody and access disputes, and I know that that program, I've actually had a couple of constituents talk to me about it. It's a really valuable program. You know, they really need that help sometimes for the custody issue, and, you know, once again, it's a program that we've put in place and that we fund and we're not cutting.

So I'm not quite sure how the opposition would propose to pay for all this with the cuts that they're proposing. I know it's—I guess some days, it's easier to be in opposition when you say, you know, you're going to do all these things and you're going to cut and burn and slash programs, but it's all going to still exist, even with the funding cuts. You know, it's easy to say that. But when you're actually in government, we have a responsibility to the people, and we are working with those people to make sure that they get all the services that they need and to support them. And, you know, I know it seems like the simple solution is to cut, cut, cut, according to the opposition. Well, that's not going to solve the problems of the day.

Investing in people and investing in infrastructure and investing in IT services for these departments and investing in the manpower so these people can do their jobs and help the people in need—that's where it's at. It's not about cutting, and it's actually something that's about families. And that's why we're on this side of the House and they're on that side of the House. We have a very different view on that. And I thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Ian Wishart (Portage la Prairie): It's a pleasure to put a few words on record in support of private member's Bill 201, The Family Maintenance Amendment and Garnishment Amendment Act, that is brought forward by the member from Midland. And I would certainly like to commend him for doing this.

Even in the relatively short time that I have been an MLA, we have seen an awful lot of activity in the area of maintenance enforcement. I think it's a reflection, frankly, of the fact that about 50 per cent of all divorces—or all marriages—end in divorce these days. And certainly, that generates a lot of problems.

And I think we're kind of losing focus here because we seem to be talking about costs and whether or not this would be an expensive bill to enforce and whether or not there's money to do this. This is about the families and making sure that particular—the children are looked after in the family that's divorced.

And now, Maintenance Enforcement Program has been extremely successful, and the agreement that gave them reciprocal arrangements with other problems has generally been very effective. I know that there have been instances where some spouses have moved from province to province to province and that makes challenges, frankly, for Maintenance

Enforcement to track these people down and enforce maintenance. But, generally speaking, it has been fairly successful, and we're really glad to see that that has worked because it does leave families without the proper support that they're supposed to have in place.

And, really, what we're asking for in this bill is that they add the legal costs that are often associated with divorces. And I'm glad to hear that the member for St. Norbert (Mr. Gaudreau) and his personal situation didn't have a lot of legal costs and that it was an agreeable type of divorce, but unfortunately, that's pretty rare. Most of them are very acrimonious. There are a lot of issues associated with them, and very often, yes, the children are the victims of—in the divorce process and pay a price. And sometimes that price is not only the loss of a parent, but it's also a financial price. And they have a loss of resources for their future.

I can think of one case where children were probably denied the ability to go off to post-secondary education because really, legal fees were left pending, and someone had to pay the bill, and I admire lawyers for their education, but they don't work for free. That's the reality out there, and they are very good at collecting their fees. And so someone pays, whether it's the spouse that was supposed to pay or the other spouse, they end up having to pay. And that comes—that money comes out of the children's pockets, indirectly, and I think that's very sad. So I would certainly encourage the Attorney General (Mr. Swan) to have another look at this.

You know, we all know that the wheels of justice do turn and, generally, give us some degree of fairness and justice in the system. But we also all know that the wheels of justice turn extremely slowly. And so here's an opportunity to do something to the system. Yes, it's not a major overhaul. It's a tweak in the system, but it will improve the efficiency, and the member for St. Norbert was very concerned about costs a little while ago. Efficiency is another way to deal with costs, and in fact, their own—in their own budget speech, they talk about the lean management style, that they're wanting to get some outside expertise to help them put in place. I applaud them for that, because I think that they could be much more efficient than they have been. And that's a saving and that would help move this Province toward a balanced-budget situation. I would encourage them to work really hard on that, because we're a long ways from balance. And so, certainly

anything in the system that would improve efficiency and save some costs would be great news for all Manitobans. And this also provides an opportunity to make the system work a little more efficiently. Sometimes the cost saving, in this case, would be to the family; sometimes it would be to the system. But certainly encourage the members opposite to rethink their position on this.

They've seen this before. If it's not perfect wording, we're certainly open on this side to making minor changes that would still give us the net result that we want, but that would improve the situation. And if the bill can be improved, we would certainly support that. So bring forward amendments if you think that that's the case; we certainly challenge you to move on this. But actually do something on this, not just leave it sit there.

One of the problems with the legal system and the reason it turned slow, is anytime there's a little barrier, it could be smoothed out, but no one ever acts on that. They just leave them in place, and we work around them and we work around them until the whole system just almost grinds to a complete halt. And so, let's fix this part of the system. We'll deal with the rest of the system another day and hopefully we can make this move forward.

I know that there are—been a number of families that—impacted by this, and I know it has an impact not only on the spouse that is responsible for raising the children, but the children themselves. And that's what we should be trying to remember here, is that's who is paying the price on not having proper action on this and the inability to collect. So I would certainly encourage the members opposite to change their mind and support this bill.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, for the opportunity to speak.

Hon. Kerri Irvin-Ross (Minister of Family Services): Family maintenance is an issue that strikes many of our constituents across this province. I think the statistics are well over 50 per cent of our families have experienced divorce and separation in their life. We know that it's the No. 1 stressor that can happen to any family, and because of that this government has worked diligently to make sure that we have a Maintenance Enforcement Program that addresses the needs of families, the children, the spouse, but also have developed a number of initiatives that provide emotional support, help with decision making, and, in some ways, we try and simplify the process and provide the support so that

the most stressful event that can happen in a family is easier to be resolved. And, at the end of it, we know that children are extremely resilient, but we need to make sure that we can avoid the issues and the concerns that can happen.

So I listened to the member across; he spoke about—it's about time your government started to do something. And I think that leads me with the opportunity to talk about what we have done to support the Maintenance Enforcement Program since we've been elected.

You can go back to 2001 and you can see where we have reorganized and created a specialized compliance unit to target individuals who haven't been paying the maintenance that they are supposed to. We've given them legislative tools, that we can do issues around registering liens on real and personal property, we can seize assets.

Also, in 2001, we provided the legislative authority to seize lottery winnings in excess of a thousand dollars and apply those winnings to arrears. In 2002, we took it one step further and we linked the Maintenance Enforcement Program with the Western Canada Lottery Corporation so we could monitor individuals that were in arrears.

More legislative changes happened. In 2004, we passed legislation that enabled the Maintenance Enforcement Program to deal with extra-provincial garnishing orders. This also clarified that if the debtor defaulted on a payment plan ordered by the deputy registrar, judge or master, the full amount of the arrears became due and payable. In 2007, we passed technical amendments to improve enforcement of orders interprovincially. In 2010, we passed changes to enable the implementation of a new computer system, introduce compensatory payments, late payment penalties, and the ability for Maintenance Enforcement Program to charge costs for certain actions taken, and created support deductions, notices and new enforcement tools.

* (10:50)

In 2012, we also came forward and made important, significant changes that help support families, and we made these changes to allow for a timely transfer for funds to those receiving support as well as simpler method of paying for those who pay support. These changes have taken us to—provide us with the ability to give support to individuals and families.

And as I began to speak, I talked about the number of other initiatives that we have in place to provide families, while they're going through a divorce proceeding, with the information and the tools that they need to use to make the best decisions.

As a social worker working in the province of Manitoba, I had the opportunity and privilege to walk this journey with a number of families and saw the pain and suffering that happened: the loss of income that happens to women that have been staying at home, the consequence of losing their family home, the consequence of their partner not feeling that they are responsible for any of the costs or maintenance of the children, and the importance of having the Maintenance Enforcement Program as an essential tool to ensure that families are—that partners are ensuring that they are taking their responsibilities seriously, that we give the parents another tool in order to address if there are arrears.

But we also have what we call the First Choice program, which is a dispute resolution, and For the Sake of the Children program, and I referred many families to this initiative and this program, and it was always well received with resounding support. And they felt that the information helped them make better decisions. The information—whether it's through dispute resolution, facts about the impact on children—it really gave parents the tools they needed to make those decisions.

We also, in our—in the work that we have done in providing families, we have made—we've improved the family law by—we have passed a number of changes to the law to extend benefits to the family law to same-sex couples. So we're making sure that as we proceed that our initiatives are extremely inclusive.

One of the other pieces that we've done in family law that I'd like to take a few moments and speak about is the tragedy that families experience, and what we have done to address domestic violence across the province. We are known as a leader in domestic violence. We have a five-year domestic violence strategy that supports victims and families, interventions for people with abusive behaviour, prevention and awareness training programs. We make investments and provide support to shelters across this province. We have recently, in our strategy, announced a \$1-million capital improvement to these shelters.

We're working with Aboriginal communities on specific strategies to address domestic violence.

We've been providing ongoing and stable funding for A Woman's Place to employ a lawyer to assist women affected by domestic violence with their legal matters. We've been working with provincially funded organizations to ensure recruitment and retention of qualified staff. We've been piloting a family support worker program through Victim Services that will support victims of domestic violence and also help them with family court proceedings. We have explored legislative options to protect victims from harassment, continuing to engage women, men and boys on—as allies in preventing violence against women. I am sure that you have seen the initiatives that we have developed with the Blue Bombers where they are spokespersons for ending domestic violence. We have also done a campaign with teens across the province and really utilized social media in getting the word out.

So we're continuing to spend \$50 million annually on programs to support victims of domestic violence and their children. This is an important strategy that supports families across the province, but, also, it is closely linked with Maintenance Enforcement Program, because for some families, the domestic violence—because of domestic violence, there's divorce and separation that's intimidation and a power that is being used. And partners need to have that ability and that support from the Maintenance Enforcement Program to make sure that their needs and their rights and their children's rights are being advocated for.

So, I stand with all of my members on this side and applaud the work that we've done to improve the Maintenance Enforcement Program. I agree that, as we move forward, that there is more work to do. I have heard the Attorney General (Mr. Swan) speak quite openly that his door is open and if the member for Midland (Mr. Pedersen) would like to have a conversation about what are the initiatives that we have done, he welcomes that. He's interested in hearing the member for Midland's thoughts and opinions.

As I started this, we know that divorce is the No. 1 stressor that happens for families. We have an important role to play as legislators in this House, to have the conversation, to make initiatives and make opportunities for families, to provide them with the support that they need to move forward. So, I thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, for this opportunity to put a few words on the record and to talk about Maintenance Enforcement Program, the work that we've done, our commitment to moving to the future.

Mr. Ted Marcelino (Tyndall Park): Mr. Speaker, it's always a pleasure to talk about the work that we do here in this Chamber. As legislators, I usually admire the tenacity and persistence of the members, both sides, in promoting what they think is a good thing. This is one such good thing. But I'll take the longer view of the bigger picture.

Why do we have laws that are regulatory and why do we have laws that are substantive and why do we have laws that promote process? It's because of the inherent limitations that we have in understanding how to control human behaviour.

Now, I'll say this, costs that are awarded in our court systems are meant to reimburse the winning party for the costs that have been spent in pursuing the claim. Now, sometimes, the only way that I could term it and label it, is that it's meant to encourage settlements, compromise, negotiation. The alternative to adversarial proceedings is always the way of conciliation, mediation and, I guess, from my personal experience, for the constituents who have consulted my office about the easy way of doing divorces, I have recommended some of the lawyers who appear before the courts, sometimes for both sides, meaning that they have this agreement that there won't be a big fight about custody, there won't be a big fight about costs, there won't be a big fight—

Mr. Speaker: Order, please.

When this matter's again before the House, the honourable member for Tyndall Park will have six minutes remaining.

* (11:00)

RESOLUTIONS

Res. 7—Lack of Transparency on Provincial Park Cottager Service Fees and Rents

Mr. Speaker: The hour being 11 a.m., it's time for private member's resolution, and the resolution under consideration this morning is sponsored by the honourable member for Agassiz, and the title of the resolution is Lack of Transparency on Provincial Park Cottager Service Fees and Rents.

Mr. Stuart Briese (Agassiz): I move, seconded by the member for Lakeside (Mr. Eichler),

WHEREAS Manitoba's provincial parks provide wonderful destinations and retreats for recreation and relaxation; and

WHEREAS Manitoba's provincial parks are an important piece of the province's tourism industry; and

WHEREAS the provincial government has not properly consulted with cottagers and has not justified the increase in the service fees and rents; and

WHEREAS park goers and cottagers alike have witnessed a reduction and a worsening of services being provided in the provincial parks; and

WHEREAS the Department of Conservation and Water Stewardship has not been transparent on the costs and breakdown of services provided to cottagers; and

WHEREAS some cottagers claim they are witnessing fee and rent increases from 250 per cent to 750 per cent; and

WHEREAS the additional funds gathered from the rent and service-fee increase will go directly into general revenue and not specifically back into park districts; and

WHEREAS the actions in raising fees and rents represents nothing more than another hidden tax on Manitobans by this provincial government.

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that the Legislative Assembly of Manitoba urge the provincial government to acknowledge the failure to properly consult with cottagers and properly disclose how those service fees and rent increases will improve park districts; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the Legislative Assembly of Manitoba acknowledge that the arbitrary rent and service fee increases represent nothing more than another hidden tax being imposed on Manitobans to help feed this provincial government's spending addiction.

Mr. Speaker: It's been moved by the honourable member for Agassiz (Mr. Briese), seconded by the honourable member for Lakeside (Mr. Eichler),

WHEREAS Manitoba's provincial parks—

An Honourable Member: Dispense.

Mr. Speaker: Dispense? Dispense.

The resolution is in order.

Mr. Briese: There are two basic components to charges applied to cottage properties in the provincial parks; one being the service fees and the

other being land rents. There are some 6,200 cottage properties in the provincial parks, roughly 5,800 of which are rented, with the remainder being owned.

Various services are provided to cottage owners in provincial parks, and the Province collects fees for those services. These services vary widely from park—park to the next. Section 18(3) of The Provincial Parks Act states that the minister must prepare an estimate of costs that will be incurred during the next fiscal year pertaining to the amounts needed to operate and maintain services, the amounts needed for capital expenses and the amounts to defray costs of administration and other services. Section 20 of the same act also states that financial statements of the operation of each park district shall be maintained for the review of any owner or occupier of land in a park district.

Contrary to popular belief, service fees are not locked in time. They are not frozen. They are to be reviewed every year and charged according to services provided. Cottage owners understand that and they have no problem paying for the services actually provided. Unfortunately, the Province has refused to do a proper cost analysis of the service fees provided. Many cottagers believe they are paying service fees on services that are provided to areas of provincial parks that aren't related to the cottage areas such as campgrounds, marinas and resorts. The Provincial Parks Act is clear and the NDP are ignoring them.

All the cabin owners are asking for is clear accounting of the services provided and the cost of those services. They are being stonewalled. They are being told by officials that the minister is not required to make those documents available and even being told that the documentation doesn't even exist.

Now, I know there's some things on the website, but it doesn't, in my estimation, live up to what the act calls for as far as clarity is concerned. When the—when Manitobans purchase a good or a service, they expect an accounting, an understanding of what they are paying for. They don't expect arbitrary costs to be simply dumped on them and then to be told to trust us; we know what we're doing. Without a full, accurate accounting, how can cabin owners be assured that a portion of their service fees are not being used to fund the NDP's out-of-control spending addiction?

Most cottage owners provide their own services to their properties. They supply their own water and

sewage systems. They provide their own lighting and, in many cases, their own road maintenance, grading and snow removal. They pay a dumping fee to a contractor on sewage removal and shouldn't be expected to pay for the same service twice, once to the contractor and then again to the Province.

From 2009 'til 2011, the minister of Conservation, the member for Dauphin (Mr. Struthers), with great fanfare and his usual flair for photo ops, waived camping fees in provincial parks, resulting in a reduction of approximately \$2.3 million a year in provincial revenues. That, of course, was pre-election. Post-election, the fees were rapidly reinstated and even increased. Many campers told me and my colleagues that was a dumb move. They felt the fees should be collected, the revenue should be used to enhance the park experience for Manitobans. That move was done fiscally, but politically, it probably worked.

Problem, of course, was a bereft hole in revenues of several million dollars. Then the minister had to make up for shortfalls. So he looked around, he had an aha moment and he decided that he had 6,200 cottage owners that he could dump his revenue shortfalls on. So he did exactly that, and that's why we're having this debate here today.

Mr. Speaker, as I said earlier, provincial park cabin owners are not opposed to paying their full share. They are asking only for transparency, fairness, and that cottage owners receive value for their fees. Unfortunately, these three requests have been totally ignored.

Second component of parks fees is land rent. Approximately 5,800 of the 6,200 cottage owners pay land rent. And this is where the major new tax grab shows itself. The land rents go to the general revenue of the province and fuel the NDP's spending addiction. The government has now changed the regulations what sets—which set land rents to cottage owners. The change was made to benefit the provincial Treasury, and has little or no relationship to providing service to cabin owners. Land rents are simply a tax on properties, and a mass of increases are simply another tax grab by the Province. Most properties have increased in value in recent years, and rental fees should reflect those increases. But increases as much as 700 per cent are obviously not—nothing more than a tax grab by a desperate government.

I have a lengthy background in municipal governance, and if we had ever proposed a mill rate

increase of 250 to 700 per cent, we would have been run out of town. In municipal government, if the assessment went up, the mill rates went down and the actual taxes remain reasonably stable. For the cabin owners, the assessment goes way up—in one case that I'm aware of, the assessment went from \$15,000 to \$112,000 in one year—and there is no mill rate to go down. The rental fees are based only on the assessment, thus causing exorbitant increases. This is unfair and inequitable.

The highwayman has come riding up to the cabin door. In a municipality, you have a mechanism to appeal your assessment. It's called the board of revision. And beyond that, you can go to the municipal board or follow a legal process. The first and second steps of that process are missing in the case of cabin owners in provincial parks. There clearly needs to be some appeal mechanism for cabin owners.

No Manitobans should be denied a right to appeal a heavy-handed, top-down imposition of such a massive fee increase. Cottage owners are ordinary Manitobans who, in most cases, cannot afford legal fees to fight their fee increases, and that is unfair. The NDP expect them to suck it up, pay their massively increased fees and go away.

Service fees and land rental are the two major components by the Province, but there are several other fees that are also levied, such as permit removals—permit renewals and automobile passes. When all the fees are added together, they indicate the government is already pulling enough money out of the cottage owners' pockets to cover associated costs.

* (11:10)

Most of the cabins in provincial parks are intergenerational and have been passed from grandparents to parents to children, who are now, in many cases, grandparents themselves. These are not wealthy people; they are hard-working Manitobans who have sacrificed other things in their lives to retain the family cabin. When cabins were first allowed in provincial parks, the premise was that ordinary people would be given an opportunity to own a cabin and truly enjoy the experience of our provincial parks.

I recently had an email from a recently retired couple who said they looked forward to spending more time at the cabin, but with their pension limitations and the massive fee increases, they have

been forced to put the cabin up for sale. Their dream was shattered.

So, in closing, Mr. Speaker, I just want to reflect on the fact that this government has now moved from allowing ordinary, hard-working Manitobans the pleasures of owning a cabin in a provincial park, to a new day when only the very rich will be able to afford the privilege.

I call on the minister to rethink what they are doing with fees and rents. Raise those fees in step with inflation. I ask the minister to review the process and base fee increases on fairness and transparency—transparency. Do the right thing, reverse the blatant tax grab from the provincial park cottage owners.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker: I want to take this opportunity to welcome our guests to the public gallery here this morning.

But I also want to take this opportunity to remind you that there is to be no participation in the proceedings of the sitting here this morning, and that includes applause. So I'm asking for your co-operation, please.

Hon. Steve Ashton (Minister of Infrastructure and Transportation): I'm pleased to speak today actually as—not only as an MLA that represents a constituency where our parks are a huge part of our quality of life, but also as the acting Conservation minister. I'm actually a former Conservation minister. So I do have some direct awareness in terms of our parks.

And I'd like to start by, Mr. Speaker, saying that one thing I am proud of, in terms of our government, is the degree to which we are reinvesting in our parks. When I say reinvesting, we now, through our parks strategy, have committed to more than a hundred million dollars of commitment for park infrastructure. And I think that's important because, you know, I've represented my constituency, and I'll make a point to what's happened at Paint Lake Provincial Park, and there are many cottage owners in that area that I represent.

And I was a bit disappointed, the member opposite, rather than deal with this just in terms of the facts, put on the record what I would call, sort of, the usual kind of political rhetoric we have.

But I want to stress that, we didn't see that kind of investment, Mr. Speaker, really, until we came

into government. Our investment, over the last five years, is \$61 million in our parks. That is five times the last five years that members opposite were in government.

And I remember the state of our parks, Mr. Speaker, and I can particularly talk about Paint Lake Provincial Park. The state of the roads, the state of the camping sites, and the state of much of the infrastructure that provided services to the people that live, some of them, full-time. There's probably more than a couple hundred people who live full-time at Paint Lake and the many seasonal cottage owners.

And I want to stress, by the way, that that is part of what we've done, and it's going to continue. Investments to have waste water treatment plants to protect Lake Winnipeg—that's important because that's an important part of the quality of life for all of us, including cottage owners; drinking water facilities and improved roads—again, Mr. Speaker, while I'm not directly responsible—for as Minister of Infrastructure and Transportation—for the road budget in terms of our parks, you ask anyone in any of our cottage areas, and that's a huge area of priority. And is there investment that's required? Absolutely, but we're putting the funding in place.

And we've also been there, by the way, for the challenges to renew Spruce Woods and St. Ambrose provincial parks, which were devastated by the 2011 flood. In fact, our Department of Conservation made it an absolute priority, Mr. Speaker, to do that.

And I do want to stress, by the way, to the member opposite, that I think his comments at the end, I think—I was most disappointed when he talked about cottage owners and, you know, making some comment in terms of only the rich, et cetera. Mr. Speaker, it's also this government, in the 2011 flood—and I'm talking about all cottage owners, not just those living in provincial parks—we put in place for the first time DFA compensation to reflect what they went through. So we need no lectures from the member opposite, no partisan lectures in terms of what we did. And I don't think there's anybody in this province didn't think that was the right thing to do, and I'm going to stress that.

I also want to stress, Mr. Speaker, that we as a government have made significant investments in expanding cottaging opportunities because we do believe it should be available, available to more and more Manitobans as one of the great elements of living in Manitoba. And by the way, perhaps it's

because I come from Thompson, I don't just talk about our summers. I talk about year round. And I would say that 'creasingly' what's shifted is we now not only have year-round residents, but year-round usage of our parks. And I invite the member opposite to join in with that.

And I want to stress again that over the last period of time, really, there hasn't been any significant change in terms of the cottage fees. And, Mr. Speaker, this has occurred at a time when, certainly, if I look at anyone else in the province there has been a shift. So yes, there's been a change in policy.

But I want to stress a couple of things. First of all, transparency is absolutely key; that's a key part of what our minister and our government has put forward. The second of all and it—and I invite the member opposite to talk to anyone. I can talk to my own experience in Thompson where I've met with cottage owners. There was an open house that was put in place.

And I'll tell you, one of the messages I got from the cottage owners is they said, you know what, we actually need more services. I know in my area there's a big concern about fire. There is a fire hall, a volunteer fire department and they're asking again that we work with them to expand those services, and we are and that's absolutely critical.

The other issue, by the way, that came out—and, you know, I've talked to cottage owners in my area as well—and that is, you know, we have to find the right balance here. But clearly, Mr. Speaker, when it comes to services it's getting a balance between the services provided and the fees that are paid. I don't think members opposite—I would hope they wouldn't be suggesting that we subsidize the situation.

And I do say, Mr. Speaker, that I find it rather passing strange that the member talked about his background with municipalities. He was the president of AMM. The AMM is on record by resolution as supporting what is exactly taking place here in terms of the land rentals.

And, Mr. Speaker, you know, I—let's be upfront here. You know, this hasn't been looked at in the last—[*interjection*] Well I—you know, when the leader—or the member opposite was speaking I wasn't heckling him and other members will the opportunity to speak. I—you know, I think it's particularly important, I know we have many visitors in the gallery to be—to have a respectful discussion.

But, Mr. Speaker, the bottom line is we cannot have a situation where we have anything other than fair cost recovery. And yes, there's a legitimate debate that we can have in terms of the information that's there—although I point to the website—there's significant information. There's a legitimate debate in terms of the park district services fees are about \$1.7 million compared to about the total cost of services—this is 2011, which is \$4 million.

I know in my area, I can speak in terms of Paint Lake. There was a time, by the way, when Paint Lake cottage residents paid the education support levy. Actually, the members opposite were in government. They increased it by actually about a thousand per cent, Mr. Speaker. That's not an issue anymore because we don't have the education support levy on residential property. So cottage owners, all Manitobans no longer pay that fee.

And, in fact, in Paint Lake people can still send their kids to school. There's a school bus that picks the kids up, takes them to Thompson, Mr. Speaker—in Paint Lake—and there are different circumstances in different places throughout the province. There's no school tax whatsoever. There's no property tax. There's no school tax. There's no education support levy. What there is is the park service fee. And again, what we put forward is what we believe reflects the true cost to providing their services.

* (11:20)

Now I want to mention, Mr. Speaker, there are caps at \$3,000. There has also been a clear recognition by the minister about equity issues. If you have a hundred-thousand-dollar cottage and a million-dollar cottage—and certainly, when I look at Paint Lake in my area there's a range in terms of the types of cottages that are available. Clearly, one of the issues that cottage owners themselves have raised is the equity of that, and what the minister's put forward is not only a cap in terms of that but a movement to a—more of a reflection of that, in terms of the service fees. Yes, partly the actual cost of services but also the equity of who pays that, and we're very aware of that.

So I want to say on the public record here—certainly, I can speak for everyone on this side of the House—what we're doing in terms of our parks is very much reinvesting in those parks. That is important. And I know, you know, the member opposite used some of that rhetoric—the spend NDP—yes, we're spending on our parks, Mr. Speaker. But, you know, before members opposite cherry-pick one of the

concerns—and legitimate concerns that people are going to raise about transparency, about fairness, that's fine—I can tell you, this side of the House makes no apology for investing in our parks. They were neglected in the 1990s, and I can tell you, I make no apology at the fact we've already invested five times the investment of the last five years the members opposite and we're going to go even higher.

So, because, Mr. Speaker, when I talk to cottage owners—and I represent a lot of cottage owners—you know what, we can have a good discussion about this issue, and I've had that discussion, but I want to say one thing, that every single one of the cottage owners that I've talked to said that they appreciate all the investments. Quite frankly, the big discussion isn't on us spending too much on our parks. When I talk to my cottage owners they say, we should be—maybe not using the word spend—investing a bit more in our parks.

So I want to assure the members opposite, I want to assure the cottage owners of this province that, yes, there are—issues are going to be raised in terms of this, but one thing this government is going to do, we're not going to neglect our parks. We're going to invest in our parks. And we're going to make sure they're accessible for all Manitobans. More park spaces, more cottage, more camping, that's how you do it. We're investing in our parks in this province and we're proud of that.

Mr. Speaker: Order, please. The honourable member for Agassiz—or, Lakeside, pardon me.

Mr. Ralph Eichler (Lakeside): Mr. Speaker, is indeed a pleasure to second the motion brought forward by the member from Agassiz, and I can tell you that my stories are a little bit different than what the minister of MIT just put on the record. In fact, I don't have a large part of provincial parks in my area but I can tell you, I have heard from several cottage owners and homeowners—it's not only cottagers that live in these parks. Some of them, it's their permanent homes. And I can tell you, it's a different story, a different story, exactly.

The minister talked about how much money that they were going to be putting into the parks. When they waived the fees, several times, several years, right before the election, it was convenient, it was called get the vote. Unfortunately, that's what this government's done, is brought forward a get out the vote, we'll be nice to the cottage people and we'll let everybody in for free. Well, Mr. Speaker, that's not good business sense. We all know that it takes

money to operate a park, maintain a park, invest in a park, and I can tell you what this government has done now is reach back into those pockets of those hard-working Manitobans and said, look, we want more of your money. They seem to think this is the rich people that have all kinds of unlimited resources that's going to be able to come forward and pay the substantial increase.

Well, the cottage owners that I talked to said, hey, we understand there has to be a fee, there has to be a charge for some of these things that's going to take place that we have been doing, 'jarbage' pickup, road maintenance, those types of things. Yes, we understand.

What they don't understand, Mr. Speaker, is very clear: why would this government not be transparent and clear about what really is the issue here? That's what they're asking. That's what these folks are here for today, to listen to what the government can say to justify—they haven't been forthcoming with that information. It's a shame that this government—and these folks had to come here today, take a day off their jobs, a day off work, to come here and try and find out what's going on. They're not being transparent, they're not clear. They don't really care what these people have to say; otherwise, they wouldn't be here today.

This government has 'borged' forward with the idea that they're going to raise increases by 250 per cent minimum to 750 per cent. Outrageous, Mr. Speaker. Whenever we look at what's happened, and many of these family traditions—the cottages that have been handed down from one generation to the next, a lot of them have not had the opportunity to be riches. Is this going only be for the rich that's going to be able to maintain a cottage at the rates that this government wants to charge for people to have them?

And they've talk—the minister talked about how this is really going to help Manitobans. Well, it's not. You know what, we only have so much disposable income after all the rate increases we've seen brought forward by this government—when they ran in 2011, said they wouldn't raise taxes. Well, guess what, 2 and half cents on gas two years ago. That was supposed to go into infrastructure. That didn't happen. They raised the provincial tax last year, 1 per cent. That was supposed to go into infrastructure. That didn't happen. This government has no credibility. No credibility whatsoever.

And these folks, these hard-working Manitobans, all they're asking, all they're asking is this simple; what is it that makes it so special that you have to raise fees by 750 per cent? Be accountable. Be transparent. Be respectful of these folks that have worked so hard to get where they are. They don't enjoy coming down here and listen to this debate. I'm sure they got other things they'd love to do. But they're desperate for answers. All they're saying is, will you show us where we need to have the funds increased and what is it going to go to?

The minister's had some hypotheticals, oh, we're going to build more. We're going to do this, we're going to do that. That's not true, Mr. Speaker. This government has a spending problem, an addiction, and they want to go to these hard-working Manitobans. It wasn't enough that they raised all the taxes they said they were not going to raise in the last election. But now they're going to them again and saying, there's no appeal. There's no second-guessing, you're going to be doing this and you're going to pay us.

Guess what? A lot of the cottages—and I'm not a cottage owner, I wish I'd could be a cottage owner but I can't, I can't afford it but that's my decision. If I want to give up something else maybe I would. But I'll tell you what, I'm glad I'm not. I'm glad I'm not a cottage owner right now. I would be so ticked at this government for what they've done to these hard-working Manitobans without any consultation whatsoever. And the minister talked about how this—you've got to maintain these parks. Well, if you remember last year, I talked about Winnipeg Beach. I talked about Hecla. They didn't even cut the grass, didn't even cut the grass in the parks. How shameful is that? Maybe they couldn't afford it after this 2 and a half cents a litre gas tax, I don't know. I don't know how much they have in their budget but it's unfortunate that they're not even maintaining them, not even maintaining them.

So what happens at the end of the day? We have an extra \$6 million that they can't justify on the existing rate that goes in the general revenue. Why would you not want to be able to do that? Why would you not want to be able to justify where the \$6 million is going? Why do you need to increase the fees by that much?

All they're asking, again, is very simple; accountability and transparency. I asked the government to table that today. This debate could go

away very easily, very easily. Is it that hard to justify why you need to increase fees by 750 per cent.

Now, spring is coming. We sure hope it's—it don't feel like it today or this past week. It's been a long winter. People looking forward to getting out and enjoying their cottages. But I can tell you, it's not going to be the same. It's not going to be the same for those people to go up to the cottage knowing that this government has a spending problem and they want them to pay for it. That's unfortunate.

Mr. Speaker: I want to take this opportunity for the second time to remind our guests that there is to be no participation in the proceedings here this morning and that includes applause. I really want this debate to continue here and I need your co-operation to make that happen. So I'm asking you once again, please do not participate, and that includes applause.

Mr. Clarence Pettersen (Flin Flon): I really appreciate being able to put a word on the record. I'm definitely against the opposition PMR. This is an important issue in my town of Flin Flon and I think we should differentiate between what cabins and what homes are.

* (11:30)

Right now, Mr. Speaker, I would like to throw you the keys to the town of Flin Flon, and what I mean by that, and I'm symbolizing that, is that Flin Flon is a population of 5,500 people. Outside of Flin Flon there's approximately maybe another five, six hundred cabins that are in unorganized territory or in parkland. Some of these people pay anywhere from \$600 to \$1,500 in lease fees. This—the Conservation Minister put out, I guess you can say, a document that was fairness, started with fairness for all cabin and homeowners. In Flin Flon many of the people live out there in homes that are anywhere from a quarter million dollars to probably \$1 million, and, like I say, they pay anywhere from \$600 to \$1,500.

We've got to differentiate homes and cabins. We also got to differentiate, if these cabins are in parks, can I go and swim in their beach? Can I fish off their dock? No. And we've got to actually move further in that. We've got to take those cabins out of the park. They've got to be part of a municipality.

So it's really important that we recognize that the Minister of Conservation is talking about fairness—fairness that we all look after our parks. Our parks are our jewel, our jewel of the North. We've got Paint Lake, we've got Clearwater Lake, we've got

Simonhouse, Bakers Narrows. These are great parks, great beaches, and right now the yurts in Bakers Narrows came up for rental and they were gone within minutes. People recognize the importance of the parks, recognize the—actually, the affordability our parks are, and they're for all Manitobans. They're not just for a certain sect that have a cabin within a park, or whatever. I want to see more lots open. I want to see lots open for my daughters and sons so they can live the life of the outdoors. Thank you.

And our government has done that. We've gone and we've opened lots and we will open more, but we also—also got to recognize that some of the assessments haven't been done since 1981. Some of the fees that the cabin owners pay, they only pay, like, 40 per cent of their costs. There's got—we've got to reorganize and bring fairness into this equation, or towns like my town, Flin Flon, or my good buddy from Beausejour, we—we need those taxpayers to also contribute to the quality of life in their area. And, like I say, I think the Minister of Conservation's recognizing there has to be adjustment. There has to be fairness for all Manitobans.

The opposition minister that was ranting and raving like a—basically an auction for bulls, got to realize that the cabin association or cabin association of Manitoba are not just for the rich, are not just for a certain amount of people. They're for everybody in Manitoba to take advantage of, and that advantage is our Manitoba advantage. We're spending money in parks. We're building up parks, and I want all cabin owners to be part of this. And, like I say, the Minister of Conservation has taken under his wing some advice and realized that this topic hasn't been touched for many, many years and there has to be an adjustment.

Some of the percentages—like I say, the opposition ministers tend to think with calculators and not with their heart. Well, remember, we're all taxpayers of Manitoba, not just a certain segment. So I have to say that I'm proud of my government for looking at a tough decision like this, recognize that all Manitobans—all Manitobans—should contribute to the cost of the parks, and we should build them up so they're there for not only our children, but for our children's children. And, like, let's open up more yurts. Let's open up more canoe routes. Let's make sure that the fishing, the hunting and all that is—can carry on. And with the proper fees from the cabin association, from all Manitobans, will be put into opening even more parks.

And I just have to say on record that my town of Flin Flon needs the help of both sides, both the opposition side and my side to make sure that there's fairness put in place, that makes sure that the Tuxedo of Flin Flon, which is Bakers Narrows, is part of contributing to the taxpayers of Flin Flon. And if you took Tuxedo out of Winnipeg, where would they be?

So it's very, very important that we recognize the inequalities here, and you jump on the bandwagon. And, hopefully, my friend from Beausejour realizes that I'm fighting for him, and that from now on—from now on—we'll stand together proudly, stoically, saying we're here for all Manitobans.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Shannon Martin (Morris): Mr. Speaker, it's my pleasure to rise this morning and speak to this very important resolution that's impacting cottagers throughout the province of Manitoba—some 6,000 cottages here in the province of Manitoba, probably representing 12 to 15 thousand actual owners.

It's with sadness that I listen to the member for Flin Flon (Mr. Pettersen) as he perpetuates this Lotto 6/49 view of what a cottage owner is here in the province of Manitoba. And I believe, if I heard the member correct—and I will check Hansard—we will—that the member just said that we need to get some of these cottages out of our parks. I mean, is the member actually advocating that the government come in with bulldozers and just bulldoze some of these cottages down, because I'm pretty sure that's what the—I think that's what the—I'm pretty sure what's the—that's what the member just said, you know. And again the member continues to perpetuate that stereotype, sort of that—the haves and the have-nots, that somehow—you know, I heard the member use the phrase, the Tuxedo of Flin Flon. You know, he referred to, you know, the cottage owners that are here with us today as a certain segment. I mean, this divisive politics that the NDP like to play with Manitobans is really unbecoming, and I—like I said, I'm quite embarrassed for the member of Flin Flon.

But let's get down to brass tacks, Mr. Speaker. Let's get—let's understand what's going on here from members opposite's perspective. According to the NDP government, the 6,161 cottages here in the province of Manitoba, they're freeloaders. That's what the NDP are saying. They are a drain on public resources. Again, that's what the NDP are saying. The NDP government have put out there that they

are diverting—that the cottages, the 6,161 cottages in the province of Manitoba, are actually diverting millions of dollars each year from health care and education so that they can reside in their Tuxedos of Flin Flon. I'm pretty sure that's what the member just said.

Now, Mr. Speaker, we on this side of the House know that the overwhelming majority of cottages represent the culmination of a long dream to own a small personal getaway. They are modest seasonal dwellings, passed down from generation to generation, well-maintained, and they form a very important part of their social circle. I mean, here in Manitoba—especially this year—our summers are quite short, and yet, again, this government wants to deny these cottage owners one brief moment of respite.

In my short tenure as critic of Conservation and Water Stewardship, this one issue is—has dominated my inbox and meetings. What stands out, Mr. Speaker, is to a person—to a person—whether it's in Whiteshell, whether it's in Falcon, whether it's at Childs Lake, every single cottage owner has said, we want to pay our fair share. They want to pay their fair share, but what they don't understand is what is that fair share, and that's where this argument lies. They're tired of a government that simply says, trust us, we know better than you; trust us, you—we are subsidizing you from the public purse; trust us, you aren't paying enough; trust us, 750 per cent is fair.

Cottage owners don't trust this government. They're simply saying, open up the books, show us the information, live up to The Provincial Parks Act, live up to section 18(3) of the parks act that says: "Each year the minister shall prepare an estimate of the costs, whether direct or indirect, that will be incurred in the next fiscal year in respect of each park district." Those financial statements of each park district shall be maintained for the review of any owner. This is all the cottage owners of Manitoba are asking for. They're asking for transparency, they're asking for accountability, but, again, they simply don't get this from this government.

You know what, cottage—Dan Lussier, who owns a cottage in Falcon Lake, recently emailed the minister and he said, our park fees will go from approximately \$1,000 to \$5,500. Our cottage is not hooked up to town water or sewer. We don't get services in the winter. Communal garbage pickup is the norm in the summer. The residents actually get together to pay for dust control out of their own

pocket. I'd hardly say that's the Tuxedo of cottages that the NDP like to perpetuate.

* (11:40)

What the NDP government is proposing will take away the possibility of the average citizen owning a cottage and making it affordable only to the elite. It's almost like a self-fulfilling prophecy. I mean the government talks about the elite. They talk about this—you know, this mythical cottage elite, and yet by their very actions, Mr. Speaker, by their 750 per cent increase, they are creating and fulfilling that very myth.

You know, Mr. Speaker, we on this side of the House, we recognize the importance of accountability and transparency, and we don't understand the government's reluctance again to open up those books to share those numbers to ensure to the cottage owners here in Manitoba, who want to pay their fair share—and again I'm going to say that they want to pay their fair share. So what is this government's reluctance to share that information?

Mr. Speaker, I'm honoured to support my colleague's resolution, and I have no doubt that many members on the opposite side will stand up in support of this resolution to ensure that the intergenerational dream that is a reality for many cottage owners isn't simply a pipe dream.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Matt Wiebe (Concordia): It is indeed a pleasure to be able to stand and speak about this issue. I think it's a very important issue for Manitobans, and I think it's something that I'm glad we've had a chance to talk about when this strategy was released and when this came before this House over a year ago, and now a chance with folks who are obviously passionate, who have taken time out of their day to come to join us. You know, I know myself I'm very excited about this upcoming cottaging season, and I know all of you are too. So I'm glad that you've come and shown your passion and come here to listen to debate.

And one thing that I have noticed has been missing to this point in the discussion is somebody to stand up and say, I am a cottage owner. I have a cottage in the park and this is how I feel about it. So I'm very pleased to be the first to stand to do that here in this House because I hear other members who I understand they have, you know, houses all over, you know, in different places and cottages in

different places, but here in Manitoba where I am very, very proud to be a cottage owner, I'm happy to talk about this issue and get this on the table.

Now, this—*[interjection]* I'm going to ask the members to just maybe give me a little bit of a chance to talk and to talk without the heckling, because I think these folks have come to this place to actually hear debate.

You know, one of the things that we're most concerned about, when it comes to a strategy on parks, is to make sure that we are accountable and we are transparent, and so this is where I'm very pleased to correct the record because it's been going on for a while now that the record—that the strategy has not been clear and it's not been out there.

So I'm very happy to talk about a document that I have in my hand and I'd be happy to share with the member from—

An Honourable Member: Morris.

Mr. Wiebe: Morris, thank you—and which talks about exactly what has been coming before this House, and what it has to do with is exactly what the members here in this House are talking about, the cost for each park and what we're currently bringing in as a government and the fact that those two numbers don't match.

Now, I'm not telling anybody anything they don't know here in this Chamber. The reality is that folks know they get what they pay for. *[interjection]*

Mr. Speaker: Is the honourable member for Concordia reading from a private document?

Mr. Wiebe: Oh, no, it's—Mr. Speaker, this is available on the government website, and I'd be happy to read the URL into the record if you'd like that. If you'd like to have the document, I'm okay with that too. It's on the website.

Mr. Speaker: Does the member have a problem—the member from Concordia have a problem with it being tabled as has been requested?

Mr. Wiebe: No, I do not.

Mr. Speaker: Then we'll table the document.

The honourable member for Concordia, to continue.

Mr. Wiebe: Thank you very much. So, Mr. Speaker, I'm very, very happy to speak about this. As I said, I'm a recent owner of a cottage and actually going into the cottage market and trying to get a sense of,

you know, what would be best for my family and what, you know, opportunities are out there, Manitoba parks was really the only option.

I'm excited about our parks and what we're doing in our parks. I'm excited about the recent announcements about investments in our parks. And when I was looking at the market and looking at the costs, you know, of outside of a park with—versus inside of a park, this was after this strategy had been announced that—this has been on the table. This was something that we knew, my wife and I, my family, knew was coming that there was going to be an increase. So I didn't go into it with closed eyes. In fact, what I knew was that the value right now was phenomenal but that even after the increase, the value would continue to be there.

And what really interested in me and what brought me as a person with a young family who wanted to have a place that we can spend our summers and enjoy ourselves was the idea that this investment, that this continued investment, that this commitment by this government would be there to get our parks to the level that we all believe that they should be.

As a few members before me have mentioned, you know, when you talk to cottagers across the board, what they'll tell you is that they understand the—first of all, the value of our parks and how important they are to themselves, to their families and to Manitoba, Manitobans. But what they also understand is that you get what you pay for. And this is absolutely what I want to focus on because you do get what you pay for, and right now we're asking taxpayers to subsidize our parks.

We understand that we need to make sure that our cottage owners are paying what they—their fair share in this and that they're getting value for their money. So when I talk to cottage owners, what they say to me is, show me where the improvements are. Where—what is this money going towards? And this is exactly what we want to do.

In fact, what we did was when we held these consultations, we went out into the province—Brandon, Dauphin, The Pas, Gimli, Winnipeg—we were all over the province. We wanted to make sure that when we created this fee structure that it was based on the work of Deloitte, of course, a very well respected consulting firm, and in fact that it was audited by an independent auditor. So we wanted to make sure that this was as out front as possible and

that people knew exactly where their money was going to.

The amount of money that we have committed to our provincial parks is incredible, and I think it really shows the—how we value provincial parks in this province. We have committed over \$100 million in funding, including to new waste water treatment plants, new water facilities. We are investing in the things that people are telling us that they care about within the parks.

This is—what we want to do is we want to show that there is transparency. It's been—it's in the resolution that members opposite have said this is a hidden tax. I can say I got my first cottage bill. I was a little bit more excited about that than I probably should have been. I got my first bill for our cottage, and when I saw it, I recognized that the final cost, the final increase, was actually printed on the bill. And, again, the cottagers in the audience would actually know that the final cost is printed on the bill.

And what's happening is that they're actually showing a discount—that we're showing a discount each year rather than saying, you know, you don't know what the amount is going to be—the final amount or that you don't know what it's going to go up to.

So we are showing cottage owners what the final cost is going to be. We're showing them the value that we're getting in terms of what's being invested in their parks. And, you know, to call this a hidden tax, really, I think, really just shows that, you know, and I tabled this document. I'd be happy to walk through it with the members opposite because they are not actually going through the information that's available out there. I'm sure some of the ratepayers here have gone through this information, but members opposite aren't willing to do that.

So, Mr. Speaker, I just wanted to end very quickly by saying, you know, I think this is a key issue when it comes to the affordability advantage that we have in Manitoba. It has a lot to do with the quality of life, which we talk about in this House all the time, that there is a lot of great things that we want to talk about, and parks is one of them. So I'm very, very happy to talk about that, to bring this to the forefront and to talk about it in a real, factual way.

* (11:50)

But what bothers me, Mr. Speaker, is when partisan politics, which happens all the time—

[interjection] And the members of the gallery can hear the heckling that's going on and continues to go on. You know, this is partisan politics at its worst where, you know, I want to talk about this: how we can include cottagers, how we can bring people in, how we can do things in a way that is sustainable, that doesn't put an undue burden on those who aren't cottage owners but that makes our parks the best place that it can be.

And one of the things that we've done very well in this province and I'm absolutely committed to is to make this an affordable place, and I want to make sure that we do that and that we continue to invest in our parks.

So thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate the opportunity.

Mr. Speaker: Before I move on to the honourable member for River Heights, I'm going to ask for the co-operation of the honourable member for Emerson (Mr. Graydon), please. Please allow the debate to continue in a respectful fashion.

Hon. Jon Gerrard (River Heights): Mr. Speaker, I rise to support this resolution. It is apt and timely that we have this discussion because contrary to what the government is saying, there are a lot of shortcomings in the information that's being provided, in the fairness, in the treatment of people and I will talk about this in due course.

Manitobans across income levels look forward to enjoying time at the lake and in our provincial parks each summer. Sitting on a dock, swimming in the lake, enjoying time with family and friends in our provincial parks is one of the delights of being a Manitoban. We don't want to lose that and we don't want to treat people unfairly and wrongly.

This year the government is moving forward to dramatically raise the lease rates. These are the land rent rates, essentially an equivalent to property tax, that is imposed on cottage owners, homeowners and those who've got cabins in our provincial parks. I, you know, have here an example of a document from the government showing how one cabin owner, cottage owner, their rent will go from \$440 to \$2,420, a 550 per cent increase. There are other examples going up 750 per cent. This is a big cash grab. It needs to be explained what the government is doing in taking this extraordinary tax grab by this NDP government.

There needs to be openness, transparency and accountability. I'm looking at the document tabled by

the MLA for Concordia. You know, there is, for example, for the Whiteshell, a very sparse allocation of expenses. There's not enough breakdown to really understand where the money is going. That—this clearly is a skimpy excuse for accountability.

And on the revenue side there's no mention of where the revenue goes and there's no mention of the fact that when the government includes revenue, they're not including the lease rate money, the equivalent of property tax. Everywhere else in this province when we pay municipal property tax or the equivalent of it, that money goes to provide the services that we're actually using. But, clearly, there should be accountability and those monies which are coming in as part of the lease rates, the land rental rate or the property tax rate, whatever you want to call it, that should be included in the revenues that are being attributed to pay for services and make sure things are going well in parks like the Whiteshell.

And we need to know what the use rates are for different individuals who are using the park, the cottage owners versus the people who are coming in on a daily basis and who are camping, et cetera, so that we actually can have a relationship between the services and how they're provided and, you know, who's paying for what. You know, I was given numerous examples in the Whiteshell of people who weren't getting services but they were having to pay and will be expected to pay dramatically increased amounts.

The Minister for Infrastructure, the MLA for Thompson, gave us a speech in which he was full of spending, but he was totally divorced from any real accountability, any real openness in the discussion. And, clearly, if you want an example of covert, hidden operations of government, we've got it, right, because of all that is being hidden instead of being shared and allowing people to participate in decision making in the parks that they're using so much.

There has been an increase in the mill rate from 2 for 4 per cent over the last number of years. It's not like things have been clear. And that was, I understand, increased so that there could be an increase in the money coming in. But if you're going to increase and have the proper assessments, you need to adjust the mill rate to the level that's actually being used in terms of services.

Now, the MLA for Flin Flon talked about, you know, the real reason, apparently, that this is coming in. He says it's about taking cabins out of the park.

This government is clearly about evicting cabin owners from parks. The MLA for Flin Flon put it clearly what the hidden reason is for this. The real reason for this extraordinary rental or property tax increase is to get cabins out of the park.

We're talking, Mr. Speaker, about average Manitobans of all backgrounds who have cottages. And the people who are going to be most affected are those on low incomes and those on fixed incomes. The people who can least afford it are going to be asked to pay an extraordinary amount or get evicted. And sadly, many will have to be evicted because they can't afford it.

This should be about retaining the family cabins. It should be about being accountable. It should be about being respectful. It is too bad that it isn't. It's time that the government fess up to what they're doing and start being accountable.

Mr. Speaker: Official Opposition House Leader, on House business.

Mr. Kelvin Goertzen (Official Opposition House Leader): Mr. Speaker, I'm asking for leave of the House to not see the clock until this resolution has come to a vote so we can see where all members stand on this very important issue.

Mr. Speaker: Is there leave of the House to permit the debate to continue until all members have had the chance to add their comments?

Some Honourable Members: Agreed.

Some Honourable Members: No.

Mr. Speaker: I hear a no. Leave has been denied.

Hon. Dave Chomiak (Minister of Mineral Resources): Mr. Speaker, I've heard a lot of discussion from members opposite about fairness. I heard a lot of discussion about respect. There's people in the gallery who have been able to observe, they haven't been—the last speech of the leader of the Liberal Party, they didn't pay any attention. They were talking to each other. They weren't listening. They weren't talking about respect.

Mr. Speaker, they talk about fairness, and the member for Morden—the member for La Salle got up and said that the government was calling these people freeloaders. Is that respectful? They're trying to make an issue that we talk about fairness where

we have a discussion about fairness in this Chamber, which is about discussion, which is about listening to sides of an argument and significant points, and then members coming up and trying to be divisive. That doesn't help the argument.

I've been in this Chamber for years, Mr. Speaker. We've brought groups here. We brought groups here when they wanted to charge user fees for home-care services, colostomies, canes, walkers, beds. And we had better discussions because we talked about issues.

We didn't try to make it all politics, try to make it all partisan. There are valid issues about this, but we ought to have a chat. Let them listen. Let them listen. And then to get up phonily and say, we want to extend debate.

They could have had debate the first hour. They had that option. They didn't choose it. They could talk about it in question period. They're not even talking about it in question period. We've been here for weeks, they've never raised the issue, because they're talking about phony procedural issues every day in question period.

They are not being real, they are pandering and trying to make a political issue instead of discussing an issue.

Yes, there are valid issues. Yes, people have come here. Yes, we should talk about it, Mr. Speaker. But we talk about the real issues. Of course, fairness is important. Fairness, obviously, is in the eye of the beholder.

Mr. Speaker, I was in a European country not long ago, when we went and looked through the—we looked through the streets that were crumbling and the pipes that weren't working. We were there. And it was very clear, and my colleague said to me, it's very clear—it's very clear—that the government of the people of this jurisdiction do not care about their infrastructure.

Mr. Speaker, that's one of the reasons why—

Mr. Speaker: Order, please. Order, please.

When this matter is again before the House, the honourable Minister of Mineral Resources (Mr. Chomiak) will have seven minutes remaining.

The hour being 12 noon, this House is recessed and stands recessed until 1:30 p.m. this afternoon.

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF MANITOBA

Thursday, March 27, 2014

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