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| Alberta | 23e | 5e | Discours du budget | 11 février 1997 | M. James (Jim) Dinning | Trésorier provincial | PC |

**Mr. Dinning:** Mr. Speaker, it is a rare pleasure for me tomove the motion standing in my name on the Order Paper.

Mr. Speaker, when I talk about the provincial budget, people immediately think of money, but the budget is about more than money. It's about setting priorities, the right priorities, Albertans' priorities, and it's about building a better province. Instead of focusing on the dollars and cents, I want to talk with Albertans today about what this budget means to them.

My first message is a simple one. Alberta is back on top, and we have never been stronger. Balanced budgets, net debt cut in half, the lowest taxes in Canada, a growing and more diversified economy, more jobs and more Albertans working than ever before, a smaller and more focused government, citizens that are skilled, energetic and motivated: with those strengths, Mr. Speaker, it's no wonder proud Albertans are saying, “Nothing can stop us now.”

The prize we set out to achieve, a solid financial foundation, that prize is now firmly in our grasp, and we aren't letting go. Now it's time to secure what we've achieved and build on it, time to put spending cuts behind us, to focus not just on what we spend but what we can achieve. That's what Budget '97 does. It keeps us on track with responsible spending, spending that's targeted at the right priorities, spending that achieves the kinds of results that Albertans expect. And that means a health system Albertans can count on, a health system that's there when they need it.

Budget '97 is also about education and training for our young people. It's about jobs and a thriving economy for our province. What we're talking about is building Alberta, a vibrant and prosperous province where Albertans enjoy a superior quality of life, a province where people are confident about the future for themselves and for their children. That's our vision, Mr. Speaker. That's what we're working so hard to achieve, and that job is a constant work in progress.

Budget '97 is about responsible spending. With this budget Albertans will see an affordable plan for spending on priorities that are important to them. They'll see a government determined to stick to a responsible course, because every commitment in this budget is paid for. Every commitment fits into a balanced budget plan. Unlike the lofty promises made by others, there are no promises paid for with borrowed money, with future tax increases, or from selling off the heritage fund or from passing debt on to our children. Some members, Mr. Speaker, may want to lure Albertans to believe there are no limits on how much we can spend, but Albertans know better. They want solid, responsible management of their tax dollars, and that's exactly what they'll get from a Ralph Klein government.

With Budget '97 we're sticking with what works: spending that we can afford, reinvesting savings in high-priority areas, continuing to search for better ways to get better results for the dollars that we spend, paying down the mortgage, doing all the same sensible things that Alberta families do when it comes to their own budgets.

Let me give you the financial highlights. First, Alberta has a balanced budget. We will never again present a deficit budget in this Assembly; that's the law in this province. This coming year Alberta will have a surplus of at least $144 million. If volatile oil and gas prices and corporate tax revenues are higher than budgeted, the surplus could be higher. In fact, it could exceed $800 million. And if those windfall revenues occur, if they come our way, every dollar of that surplus will go to pay down the debt. We'll start this year with a $2.2 billion payment on our net debt. That's the surplus we expect at the end of March '97, and like every surplus in Alberta the law says it must go directly to the debt.

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Indeed, unless the Liberals would want to break it, Mr. Premier. That's not going to happen, because Alberta's net debt will be down to $3.5 billion by next March, down from the peak of $8.3 billion. We're on track to pay off the original 25-year mortgage in just nine years. When Alberta celebrates its 100th birthday in 2005, the net debt will be gone completely.

Because debt is going down, interest savings are going up. In fact, we're saving $389 million in interest costs compared to what we spent in 1994, and this is where Albertans see the direct benefits of a responsible fiscal plan. Instead of going to bankers and bond traders, the money we're saving is being reinvested in programs that count the most for Albertans.

On the spending side we're looking at modest increases overall, keeping us on track and in control of our budget. Total spending will increase by 1.2 percent this year, to a total of almost $14 billion. Spending on programs goes up by $296 million this year, and the bulk of that money goes to Albertans' top priorities. Health and education now make up 63 percent of our total program spending, and that's up from 53 percent just five years ago. Mr. Speaker, we got our priorities right.

On the revenue side we all know that oil and gas prices are almost impossible to predict, and those prices have a huge impact on Alberta's revenues. That's why we continue to use conservative forecasts and build in protection in case things aren't as good as others expect. For this year we will budget Alberta's revenues at $14.1 billion. For the sixth year in a row Albertans will see no increases in taxes and no new taxes. Mr. Speaker, Alberta has no sales tax, and under a Ralph Klein government, it will never have a sales tax.

For low- and middle-income working families taxes in fact are going down. By next year a one-income family with two children will pay no Alberta taxes until they earn $24,500. For 130,000 families and 200,000 children in this province, that's the best news of all in today's budget. Those are the financial details.

Let me turn from the numbers to what's most important for Albertans, and that's health and education. Budget '97 means a health system that Albertans can count on. In November government announced the Action for Health package to reinvest in specific initiatives where Albertans expect to see real improvements in access to health services. We've listened to Albertans, listened when they said, “Assure me that the health system will be there when I need it or when my children are sick.” Albertans told us waiting times are too long. They said, “We need more nurses and frontline health workers.” They want more services in communities and home care for those who need it. Albertans want to know the system is working well, not by throwing money at the problem but by spending money wisely and making sure the problems get fixed.

The Action for Health package responds directly to what Albertans said was important. With the actions we're taking, people can expect to see shorter waiting times for surgeries, more frontline staff, and predictable funding for regional health authorities. They can expect better information about health and a greater emphasis on staying healthy. With these actions Albertans have every reason to expect stability, to expect quality care, and to expect problems in health care to be fixed. Funding for health will increase by 3.4 percent this year. In total we'll spend over $4 billion on health, more than any other area of government.

Budget '97 also means a strong focus on education. Albertans want our children to succeed and to be able to compete with the best in the world. As a former Minister of Education I can't tell you how proud I was last month when we learned that Alberta's 13 year olds and 16 year olds led the country in science achievements. Our grade 8 students ranked third in the world, tied with Japan. Those results are a tribute. They're a tribute to Alberta's hardworking teachers, they're a tribute to Alberta's hardworking students, and they're a tribute to those professionals who work so hard to develop the very best science curriculum in all of this country.

To me that success is what budgets are all about. They're not just about dollars and cents. They're a powerful combination of talent, effort, and resources devoted to achieving what's right and what's good, and with Budget '97 we're determined more than ever to keep working, to build more success stories for Alberta's students. This year our efforts are devoted to making sure more students finish high school. We're working with teachers to improve the achievement of students in math. We're putting more computers in schools to make sure students have access to information technology so that they enter the 21st century with 21st century skills.

We're working hard to improve the co-ordination of services to children, and we're providing additional funds for children with severe special needs. Spending for basic education will increase by 3.3 percent this year, to a total of $2.8 billion. That's over $5,000 invested this year alone in the education of every student in Alberta.

On the postsecondary side we're taking action to reward excellence in our universities, our colleges, and technical institutes and tie more of their funding to the results that they achieve. We're increasing financial assistance to students and investing $40 million to improve facilities and equipment. Spending on postsecondary education and training will go up by 6.2 percent this year, for a total of $1.16 billion. The new Canada/Alberta agreement provides an additional $107 million for labour market programs.

Mr. Speaker, on top of investing in health and education, Albertans want to know that their government is spending their money where it can make a real difference for people and their communities. This year we're increasing funding for the Alberta seniors benefit by close to 11 percent. For Alberta seniors this means their government will spend $180 million on one of the most comprehensive seniors benefits programs in all of Canada, and we will keep working with seniors to make sure support is there for those who need it the most.

Alberta's social assistance programs will keep their strong focus on getting people back into the workforce and able to support themselves and their families. In total we'll spend almost $700 million for income support programs. For some Albertans this means increases in shelter allowances. It means an increase in widows' pension benefits and an increase in benefits in the assured income for the severely handicapped. We'll shift the savings from reduced welfare caseloads to high-priority areas so we can expand support for disabled Albertans and deliver better services to our children.

With Budget '97 we're taking additional steps to support Alberta's communities. Currently our communities share in over $51 million in revenues from lotteries. By next April an additional $50 million will be shared with communities on a per capita basis. Community lottery boards will be in place to set priorities and decide how the additional funds should be spent.

Finally, Mr. Speaker, Budget '97 means jobs and a growing Alberta economy. Our goal is a simple one: to build the right climate for growth in Alberta's economy so businesses and industries will prosper and so Albertans will see more jobs – good-paying, high-quality jobs. All the signs point to a broader and far more diversified economy than we've ever had in this province, and forecasters see Alberta leading the rest of Canada in economic growth. We have forecasted our growth this year at 3.6 percent. For Albertans that good news means jobs. More Albertans are working than ever before, and there appears to be no letup in that trend. In the last four years 157,000 jobs were created, and four out of every five new jobs are full-time jobs.

We're not stopping now, Mr. Speaker. We will keep working with the private sector to build on the Alberta advantage to create jobs and opportunities for young people here in their own home province. And as my good friend Paul Taylor always says, “They won't have to leave home to take on the world.”

On the government side, Mr. Speaker, we're sticking to what we can do and do well: staying the course on our fiscal program, maintaining the lowest overall taxes in Canada, providing targeted tax reductions where they can make the most difference, expanding the focus on research and development, maintaining and improving Alberta's infrastructure, and helping build a highly skilled workforce that's up to the challenge.

Budget '97 means taxes on airline and railway fuel go down, down so that they enhance Alberta's competitive position. Taxes on machinery and equipment are down another 20 percent this year to stimulate investment and job growth, and all the signs are again that it is working. We're looking at major plant expansions and new investments across this province, investments that will create jobs for Albertans.

As part of Budget '97 we're taking steps to expand the focus on research and development. We're investing $5 million in the science and research fund to kick start new strategic research and development initiatives. That's right. We're doing that, Mr. Speaker, so leading edge ideas will turn into leading edge products and services.

In agriculture we'll keep pushing to expand Alberta's agrifood industry. We'll establish the new agra value added corporation to get new products into the marketplace, and that means good news for farmers.

With exports leading Alberta's economy, we will move ahead with plans to build a safe, efficient trade corridor from Grande Prairie in the north to Coutts at the United States border. For Alberta's export businesses, for truckers and transporters this means getting goods to U.S. markets quickly and efficiently. For people in rural Alberta it means a safer way to get from Grande Prairie to Fox Creek or from Fort Macleod to Coutts. For people living in our cities it means safer interchanges to keep traffic flowing and keep transport trucks off city streets.

Mr. Speaker, that's Budget '97 in a nutshell.

I said at the outset that I wanted to talk with Albertans about what this budget means to them. It means a health system they can count on. It means better results in education, more students staying in school and achieving the success that they deserve. It means more money spent on benefits for Alberta's seniors, better programs for children, for disabled Albertans, and for Albertans working hard to get a leg up so they can support themselves and their families. For thousands of Alberta families it means more money left in their pockets. For communities it means sharing lottery revenues. For businesses it means a chance to grow and expand right here in Alberta with a government that stays the responsible fiscal course, sticks to what it does best, opens doors and creates the right climate for growth. For Alberta's young people this budget means hope, hope that jobs will be there when they're ready to take them on. For all Albertans it means a deliberate and affordable plan, a plan that builds on our strong financial foundation, a plan that keeps building this province, building a future for all of us.

As I stand here today, I naturally look back on the past four years, and the message that I want to leave with Albertans is this one: thank you; you were right. Four years ago when we told you the straight goods about the province's fiscal situation, you told us to get on with it, to act now and act fast to balance the budget. We promised Albertans we would do that, and we kept that promise.

A year ago you told us to keep paying down Alberta's debt, reinvest savings to make sure our children get the best education and so that our health system is there when you need it. And you were right. You know what's best for your province, and you've never been shy about telling your government what needs to be done. A good government, the Ralph Klein government, will always follow your lead.

Today, Mr. Speaker, Alberta is back on solid ground. We're stronger than ever, and, yes, we're a little wiser than we were before. We're firmly grounded in the right priorities, and we are determined to stay the course.

I'll close today on a personal note. I've had the honour of being a Member of the Legislative Assembly for 11 years. That's a special honour that the people of Alberta bestow on all of us, all of us who serve in this Chamber, and I want to thank the people of Calgary-Lougheed for that honour, Mr. Speaker. Over those 11 years I've had the privilege of working with you, sir, and with my colleagues in this Chamber. I've also had the good fortune to work with a talented cast of public servants, professional men and women with wisdom and ideals and a zeal to make a difference, to make Alberta a better place. I want to say a special thank you to my colleagues and especially to so many people I've worked with over the years. Finally, I want to say thank you to members of my family, who've been at my side since day one.

I always knew that I would turn a corner and this day would be right in front of me, but that doesn't mean I'm any better prepared for the turmoil of mixed emotions. Gratitude, gratitude for the honour and the privilege of serving Albertans and helping guide the province's finances. Pride, pride for what has been accomplished. Hope, hope that Alberta's future is brighter than ever, that the 21st century will indeed belong to Albertans. And confidence, confidence that the leadership of this province is in good hands, the capable hands of Ralph Klein.

So, Mr. Speaker, as I beg leave to adjourn debate, I want to say thank you to my fellow Albertans, and I want to say thank you to Premier Ralph Klein.

Thank you, sir.