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The 30th Legislature
Second Session

Select Special
Democratic Accountability
Committee

Election Act
Election Finances and Contributions Disclosure Act
Public Presentations

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**Legislative Assembly of Alberta
The 30th Legislature
Second Session**

Select Special Democratic Accountability Committee

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6:30 p.m.

Monday, November 16, 2020

[Mr. Schow in the chair]

The Chair: Good evening, everyone. I'd like to call this meeting to order. The room is eerily empty, but I know that everyone is on conference call with the new requirements. I'm grateful for everyone joining us this evening. I will call this meeting to order and welcome all the members and staff in attendance at this meeting of the Select Special Democratic Accountability Committee.

My name is Joseph Schow. I am the Member for Cardston-Siksika and chair of this committee. What I will do is that we'll first go around the table and ask those present in the room to introduce themselves, and then I'll go over those who are joining us on the phone. To my right . . .

Mr. Horner: Nate Horner, Drumheller-Stettler.

Dr. Massolin: Good evening. Philip Massolin, clerk of committees and research services.

Mr. Roth: Good evening. Aaron Roth, committee clerk.

The Chair: Excellent. Thank you.

Before I go to those on the phone, I will ask you, if you are on the phone and you are not speaking, to mute your microphone. We're getting quite a bit of feedback.

Rather than having you introduce yourselves, I'll just say who I do have on the phone. Joining us from the NDP caucus via video conference would be Mr. Joe Ceci from Calgary-Buffalo, Mr. Thomas Dang from Edmonton-South, and Ms Heather Sweet from Edmonton-Manning. Joining us from the government caucus would be Ms Laila Goodridge, the Member for Fort McMurray-Lac La Biche; Jeremy Nixon, Calgary-Klein; Mr. Brad Rutherford, Leduc-Beaumont; and R.J. Sigurdson from Highwood.

Did I miss anyone?

Ms Fir: MLA Tanya Fir here.

The Chair: MLA Tanya Fir is here, and I do believe that Ms Rakhi Pancholi from Edmonton-Whitemud has joined us as well.

I will note the following for the record. Based on the recommendation from Dr. Deena Hinshaw regarding physical distancing, attendees at today's meeting are advised to leave the appropriate distance between themselves and other meeting participants, which is definitely happening. Please note that the microphones are operated by *Hansard*. Committee proceedings are being live video and audiostreamed on the Internet and broadcast on Alberta Assembly TV. Please set your cellphones and other devices to silent for the duration of the meeting and your communication devices to mute if you're not speaking. Pursuant to the November 16, 2020, memo from the hon. Speaker Cooper I'd like to remind everyone that the updated committee room protocols require that outside of individuals with an exemption, those attending all committee meetings in person must wear a mask at all times unless they are speaking.

We will now go to item 2 of the agenda, which is the approval of the agenda. Does anyone have any changes that they would like to make? Given that we do have people on the phone, I'll give a little more time when I ask these questions to ensure that if you do have a question or want to make a point, you have time to get the clerk's attention. Is there anyone who would like to make any changes to the agenda?

Seeing none, can I get someone to please move that the agenda be adopted? I see that Mr. Horner moved that the agenda for the

November 16, 2020, meeting of the Select Special Democratic Accountability Committee be adopted as distributed. All those in favour, please say aye. Thank you. Any opposed, please say no. That motion is carried.

Moving on to item 3, approval of the minutes from the October 30, 2020, the November 5, 2020, and the November 6, 2020, meetings, we do have draft minutes from our last three meetings. They were posted on the committee's internal website for the members to review.

We shall start with the October 30, 2020, meeting. Are there any errors or omissions to note? Hearing none, can I get a member to move that we adopt those minutes? Mr. Horner – I recognize him – moves that the minutes for the October 30, 2020, meeting of the Select Special Democratic Accountability Committee be approved as distributed. All those in favour, please say aye. Any opposed, please say no. That motion is carried.

We'll move on to the next meeting. Are there any errors or omissions for the November 5, 2020, meeting? Hearing none, can I get a member to move those minutes? Mr. Horner moves that the minutes for the November 5, 2020, meeting of the Select Special Democratic Accountability Committee be approved as distributed. All those in favour, please say aye. Any opposed, please say no. That motion is carried.

Finally, are there any errors or omissions to note for the November 6, 2020, meeting minutes? Hearing none, can I get someone to please move those minutes? I see Mr. Horner again – three times a charm – moves that the minutes of the November 6, 2020, meeting of the Select Special Democratic Accountability Committee be approved as distributed. All those in favour, please say aye. Any opposed, please say no. That motion is carried.

We will now move on to the committee's review pursuant to Government Motion 25, which is item 4 on the agenda. Item 4(a) is the research services update. As noted at the committee's last meeting, research services has prepared a summary of submissions from stakeholders and the public as part of its review of the Election Act and the Election Finances and Contributions Disclosure Act. These documents were posted to the committee's internal website for your review. I would like to call upon Ms Robert from research services to give a brief overview of the documents, and then we'll open the floor to any questions that members may have. My understanding is that Ms Robert is on the line.

Ms Robert, the time is now yours.

Ms Robert: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. I hope everybody can hear me. I will start with the submission summary for the Election Act review. It was posted to the internal website on November 6. There were 22 written submissions received with respect to the Election Act. Three came from stakeholders, and 19 came from private citizens. In addition, the Chief Electoral Officer indicated that the technical briefing he made to the committee on August 26 with respect to the Election Act should stand as his submission to the committee, recommending changes to the act.

Of the 22 submissions, nine are not strictly within the scope of the committee's review. They made comments with respect to things like the voting system that we use in Alberta and electoral boundaries and issues such as that. Therefore, they were summarized in a very high-level way sort of near the end of the document.

I will just quickly give you an idea of the types of issues that were raised in the submissions. One, of course, was the recommendation by the Chief Electoral Officer that the election statutes be rewritten and that the Election Act and the EFCDA be combined and that modernized language be used.

There were also some submissions with respect to modernizing the enumeration process so that it's not necessarily done door to door and modifying the type of information that is gathered on the list of electors and then clarifying how that information is shared.

There were also comments with respect to the nomination process. Some submitters feel that the nomination process should be overseen by a neutral body. Others feel that the nomination process shouldn't be regulated in any way.

With respect to elections specifically there were comments calling for fixed election dates, for the need for voter identification, clarifying the rules with respect to scrutineers and various other items related to elections. There were also submissions with respect to modernizing the polls; carrying on with the process used in the last provincial election in advance polling, where electors can vote anywhere; using vote tabulators; changing the rules for special ballots; and that type of thing.

There were also some submissions with respect to government advertising in the election period, some submitters calling for an extension of the time period when government advertising should be restricted.

There were also comments with respect to the powers of the Election Commissioner, that they should be very stringently controlled so that there's no interference with the Election Commissioner's powers.

Then the Chief Electoral Officer made a suggestion with respect to the timing of implementing changes; you know, if they're close to an election or not close to an election, the effect on his operations.

Then, of course, as I indicated, the additional issues that were sort of outside of the scope of the review are noted at the end.

I will leave it there and then quickly go over the submission summary with respect to the Election Finances and Contributions Disclosure Act. Then I'd be happy to take any of your questions.

6:40

With respect to the EFCDA, 32 written submissions were received. Fifteen were from identified stakeholders, and 17 were from private citizens. Then, of course, similarly, the Chief Electoral Officer indicated that his technical briefing with respect to the EFCDA should stand as his submission with respect to his recommendations for changes to that act.

Just a general overview of the types of issues raised. Again, the comments about rewriting and combining the election statutes are reflected in this document. There were issues raised with respect to the regulation of third-party advertising. Some feel that there should not be any third-party advertising; others feel that it should be more opened up. There were submissions with respect to contributions and expenses, you know, requesting that prewrite disclosure of contributions occur or, like, a disclosure of contributions early enough in the election process so that voters will know who is contributing in that way to particular candidates or parties. Then there were submissions with respect to the reporting process that the candidates are subjected to and the monitoring processes, so issues related to improving and simplifying processes and requirements, expenses, and financial reporting.

I think I'm just going to leave it there, and I'd be happy to try to answer any questions anybody might have. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Okay. Are there any questions for Ms Robert regarding her report? Okay.

Hearing none, we'll go on to item 4(b), which is the next steps in the review of the Election Act and the Election Finances and Contributions Disclosure Act, additional research support for deliberations. As we continue our review pursuant to Government Motion 25, I would like to remind members that the committee is

required to report back to the Assembly in relation to its review of the Election Act and the election finances and contributions act by January 13, 2021, pursuant to section 7(b) of the motion. At this point in the process we have received technical briefings from the Ministry of Justice and Solicitor General and from Elections Alberta, presentations from seven identified stakeholders in relation to two statutes, written submissions from both the public and identified stakeholders, and this evening the committee is holding a virtual public meeting with members of the public in relation to the Election Act and the election finances and contributions act.

At this point the committee should also consider what additional research support it requires at this time. I will turn the time over to Ms Robert to make some comments on the kind of research the research team may be able to provide the committee at this point in the review and then open the floor for discussion.

Ms Robert.

Ms Robert: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Okay. Typically at this point of a review, when the committee is getting ready to deliberate the recommendations it wishes to make, the committee will often call on research services to prepare an issues and proposals document. The committee will be quite familiar with that type of document as we prepared two with respect to recall and citizens' initiatives. It's a four-column document that sets out the major issues and proposals made by members of the public that made written submissions, identified stakeholders in their written submissions, identified stakeholders in their presentations to the committee, and, of course, any recommendations that come out of the virtual presentations that the committee is going to hear this evening.

The issues and proposals document is organized by issue and specific recommendation. It notes the particular section of the act that is affected. It also, in the notes section, in the fourth column, typically has reference information for the committee to refer to, you know, a particular submission, the rationale that was offered in it, or crossjurisdictional information, that sort of thing.

Yeah. I think I'll basically stop there, but that's generally the type of document that committees will often ask us to do at this point in order to aid in the deliberations. Thank you.

The Chair: Okay. Thank you very much for that, Ms Robert.

I will now open the floor to discussions. I believe that Ms Fir has something that she'd like to add to the discussion. Ms Fir, the floor is yours.

Ms Fir: Thank you. Yes. I'd like to move a motion, that the Select Special Democratic Accountability Committee direct committee research services to prepare a written summary document of issues identified through written submissions and oral presentations to the committee, including those made through virtual public meetings, in relation to the committee's review of the Election Act and the Election Finances and Contributions Disclosure Act.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms Fir.

Before we proceed, I would just like to consult with the committee clerk here with regard to the type of motion this is. I don't believe this would be a substantive motion. Okay. Yeah. I just wanted to make sure that we didn't have to vote on it with regard to notice, but my understanding is that there is no notice required for this kind of motion.

We do have a draft motion on the screen. All the members would have access to that motion. I'll just give you a quick moment, everyone on the committee, to review that motion before we have any conversations about it if there are any. Okay. I think everyone has probably had a chance to look at it by now. Is there any further

discussion or comment on this motion? Anyone with anything from the opposition caucus?

Okay. Hearing none, then I am prepared to call the question on this motion. It has been read. Everyone has seen it. All those in favour of this motion moved by Ms Fir, please say aye. Any opposed, please say no.

That motion is carried.

Are there any further comments? Mr. Horner.

Mr. Horner: Yes. I'd like to make a motion if I could, Chair. I'd like to move that

the Select Special Democratic Accountability Committee make the documents entitled Summary of Written Submissions: Election Act and Summary of Written Submissions: Election Finances and Compensation Disclosure Act available to the public.

The Chair: Okay. This motion would also fall under the previous – similar to the previous motion, no notice is required. The motion is on the screen.

Mr. Horner, have a look at that, make sure it's up to kind of the spirit or the letter that you had intended. Okay. Mr. Horner approves.

All members have had a chance to look at it. Are there any further discussions? Mr. Dang, please go ahead.

Mr. Dang: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I guess my only comment is – and I did review it. I'm not sure if there was any personally identifiable contact information in terms of, like, things that may be released. I want everyone to make sure that those aren't included in a release to the public.

The Chair: Sounds like a reasonable thought.

Dr. Massolin, do you want to maybe just kind of explain procedure, whether that information is public?

Dr. Massolin: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'd be happy to. My understanding is that this motion just deals with the two submission summaries. In that type of document we don't include any identifying information. It's just a summary of the submissions, and simply the names of the individuals making the submissions are listed in a chart at the end of each document.

Thank you.

Mr. Dang: Perfect. Thank you.

The Chair: Is that sufficient, Mr. Dang?

Mr. Dang: Yeah. It's good. Thank you.

The Chair: Okay. Any other comments or questions regarding this motion moved by Mr. Horner?

Okay. I'm not seeing any, so we will then call the question on the motion moved by Mr. Horner. All those in favour, please say aye. Any opposed, please say no.

That motion is carried.

Is there any further discussion or motions to bring forward at this time?

Not seeing any, we'll then go on to the final item of business, item 5, other business. For the previous virtual public meeting the committee had taken the recommendations of the subcommittee on committee business in regard to the time allotment afforded to presenters to make their presentations and also for the question-and-answer period. The committee will recall that two minutes were afforded to the presenter, with an additional four minutes being allocated evenly between the Official Opposition and government

caucus for questions. Does the committee wish to continue with this time allotment for this evening's meetings? If I don't hear anyone, I will assume: yes.

Ms Goodridge: Yes.

The Chair: Sorry. Who was that?

Ms Goodridge: Yes.

The Chair: Okay. That was Ms Goodridge.

There's no real need for a motion here, but unless anyone objects, then that's how we will proceed.

Being that the time is 10 minutes to 7 and our public town hall begins at 7, I will just suggest that this committee recess until that time unless there are any objections, any other business to bring forward at this time.

Hearing none, this committee will be recessed until 7 o'clock.

[The committee adjourned from 6:50 p.m. to 7 p.m.]

The Chair: Good evening, everyone. I'd like to welcome all those who are joining us for the second virtual public meeting being held as part of the Select Special Democratic Accountability Committee's review pursuant to Government Motion 25. The topics to be discussed during this meeting are the Election Act and the Election Finances and Contributions Disclosure Act.

Before we begin, I would like to invite members of this committee to introduce themselves at the table, and then I will go through the list of those who are joining us via video conference. Starting to my right.

Mr. Horner: Nate Horner, Drumheller-Stettler.

Mr. Roth: Good evening. Aaron Roth, committee clerk.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Also joining us this evening via video conference, from the opposition caucus, NDP caucus, would be: Mr. Joe Ceci of Calgary-Buffalo, Mr. Thomas Dang of Edmonton-South, Ms Rakhi Pancholi of Edmonton-Whitemud, and Ms Heather Sweet of Edmonton-Manning. From the government, UCP caucus: Ms Tanya Fir, subbing for Mrs. Tracy Allard; then we have Ms Laila Goodridge of Fort McMurray-Lac La Biche; Mr. Jeremy Nixon of Calgary-Klein; Mr. Brad Rutherford of Leduc-Beaumont; Mr. R.J. Sigurdson of Highwood; and Mr. Mark Smith of Drayton Valley-Devon.

Please note that tonight's meeting is being broadcast on Alberta Assembly TV, live streamed on the Assembly website, and also broadcast on various social media channels, including Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. This meeting will be transcribed and available through *Hansard* for the public record.

Tonight's presenters will be making their presentations via teleconference. I would remind those joining us for the meeting that based on the recommendations from Dr. Deena Hinshaw regarding physical distancing, attendees at today's meeting are advised to leave the appropriate distance between themselves and other meeting participants. Additionally, I would remind everyone of the updated committee room protocols, which require that, outside of individuals with an exemption, those attending a committee meeting in person must wear a mask at all times unless they are speaking.

The format of tonight's meeting will be very straightforward. Presenters have preregistered to make a two-minute presentation to the committee on the Election Act and the Election Finances and Contributions Disclosure Act. After each presentation, committee

members will have an opportunity to ask presenters questions. I would ask that before they begin their presentation, each presenter please introduce themselves for the record and let the committee know where they are calling from. Just for more clarity's sake, there will be two minutes of questions from each side; two minutes from the government caucus and two minutes from the opposition caucus. We'll go back and forth beginning with the opposition caucus tonight, after the first presenter. For the edification of presenters, you do have two minutes to present. When the time expires, I'll let you know, and I'll let you finish your thought, but two minutes is all we will be allotting you.

With that in mind, I'll now turn it over to our clerk, Mr. Roth, to introduce the first presenter.

Mr. Roth: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The first presenter: Dr. Melanee Thomas. Are you on the phone?

Dr. Thomas: I am. Can you hear me okay?

Mr. Roth: You bet.

Melanee Thomas

Dr. Thomas: Perfect. As noted, my name is Melanee Thomas, and I'm a political scientist at the University of Calgary. I'd like to thank you for the opportunity to speak to you as a member of the public. If possible, I'd like to make five points.

First, I'm aware of and agree wholeheartedly with the expert testimony offered to this committee by my colleague Dr. Lisa Young. I particularly agree with what she outlines as the animating principles that should be used to guide election campaign and party financing.

Second to this, I would add that the cap on donations in general, but in particular to PACs, must be lowered to meet the principle of fairness. Particularly, if the reference point for fairness in legislation is the participation of individual Albertans in this kind of democratic process, a threshold of \$1,000 would be more appropriate.

Third and related, prewrit disclosure for campaign and PAC donations should be mandatory. Albertans have the right to know in advance of voting who is financing all of the campaigns that they see.

Fourth, I'd like to speak to citizen initiatives and to recall. Both initiatives, but particularly recall, I think speak to democratic malaise and, specifically, a fundamental lack of confidence in elections as fair and effective accountability mechanisms. It would be more effective, efficient, and cheaper to improve Albertans' confidence in elections as accountability mechanisms than to go either of these routes. In particular, recall, I fear, will be used as a mechanism for nuisance and harassment, especially if there's a low threshold for it. I'm reminded of *This Hour Has 22 Minutes* and Stockwell Day during the 2000 federal election. I teach it as a cute example, but I don't want it to be used as an actual, real thing. Otherwise, we set thresholds that are so high like British Columbia, where these things are never used.

Fifth and finally, if we're going to go ahead with these initiatives and with things like Senate elections anyway, I would like the committee to consider moving them to the fixed provincial election date rather than municipal election dates. The rationale is that municipalities are often writing their own plebiscites. There are multiple elections going on with municipal elections as well. To clarify the process for citizens, it would be cleaner and more efficient to do it during provincial election dates rather than municipalities.

The Chair: Thank you, Dr. Thomas. I appreciate that.

Dr. Thomas: Thank you.

The Chair: We will now go to questions, first from the opposition caucus.

I will make just a quick note. During your presentation you did address recall and citizens' initiatives. While I understand that was part of the committee's mandate, we have gone past that, so I would ask committee members to keep questions for Dr. Thomas germane to the Election Act and the Election Finances and Contributions Disclosure Act.

We will go to the opposition caucus first. Do we have a question from them? Mr. Dang, whenever you start speaking, your time will begin.

Mr. Dang: Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you, Dr. Thomas, for your comments today. I thought it was really helpful that you tried to summarize your points in such a way. I guess I want to keep it close and tight here. I want to talk more about your prewrit disclosure for campaigns and PACs and why you think they should be mandatory. Could you elaborate a bit on why you think it's important that that disclosure happens in the public interest?

Dr. Thomas: It goes to the idea of the transparency, integrity, and fairness of the process. I worry that if disclosure comes after the fact, Albertans who had been persuaded or had been moved by some campaigns might feel like they're duped. This is the reason why we say that transparency is a key part of the process, where while there's a bit of an administrative burden to asking for disclosure before the writ, people have a right to know who's coordinating, who's working together, and they just have a right to know who's paying the bills for these kinds of campaigns.

It also speaks to the integrity of the process. The United States Supreme Court notes that sunshine is the best disinfectant. Transparency allows voters to have confidence in the integrity of the process. And, similarly, it's fair. It's the sort of thing that makes sure that disclosure is happening at the same time, and people can choose to do with the information what they will.

Mr. Dang: Thank you.

Just a quick follow-up. I wanted to touch on your idea for the thousand-dollar donation limit again. Just to clarify: do you think that should be an amalgamated limit for between, let's say, PACs and political parties and ridings, or do you think it should be broken up like it is federally?

Dr. Thomas: I mean, if it's a low threshold, I'm okay with having that be a thousand dollars per entity, like, to the party in general, to an electoral district association, and to a PAC, but the higher the threshold, the less enthusiastic I am for that. My rationale is that I see contributions as a form of political participation. If you frame it as a form of political participation that we want to encourage people to do, you democratize it by allowing more people to do it, but you also need to democratize it by keeping the ceiling threshold on it to inspire it to be something that everybody does, right? My big concern about the . . .

The Chair: Dr. Thomas, please go ahead and finish your thought, but just if you could wrap it up quickly.

Dr. Thomas: Sorry. Okay. Yes.

My concern is that if the threshold is high, many people will see it as something that's not for them, and that further erodes their confidence in the process, but if it's low, then people will see that

it's part of what you do as a democratic citizen. The other thing with low thresholds is that you can do things like say that you can donate to all these different places. This is seen to be something that you do as a citizen without compromising the fairness or the transparency of the process.

The Chair: Okay. Thank you, Dr. Thomas.

We'll now go to a two-minute question-and-answer period with Mr. Rutherford, I believe. Mr. Rutherford, whenever you're ready.

Mr. Rutherford: Thank you, Chair. MLA Dang touched on one of the topics that I was going to ask a question about. I just wanted to double-check, though, because I may have missed it. Are you talking about a thousand dollars in total? If you could go over that again, if that was for local campaigns or provincial, just so I can get some clarity on that. I might have missed it.

Dr. Thomas: My recommendation is that the donation ceiling for political action committees be dropped down to a thousand dollars. Like, in general I would always support the ceiling for any of the contribution limits to any of these entities to be capped at something like a thousand dollars, just because that does democratize the process, but in particular what I'm concerned about is the threshold to political action committees, or PACs, being set at \$30,000. This seems like markedly, way too high based on my read of the academic literature on this subject.

Mr. Rutherford: What about spending limits in terms of what a PAC can do or what a particular local campaign can do? If we're going to lower what an individual can donate, would you favour or could you speak to capping what can be spent in total?

7:10

Dr. Thomas: Yes. If we look at the evidence in Canada compared to other jurisdictions as well, there doesn't seem to be any evidence to suggest that lower contribution limits actually hinder democratic competition, so in instances in Canada where we set pretty stringent thresholds on spending limits, people are still able to compete and elections happen perfectly reasonably.

Where we start to see things go off the rails is when those contributions and the spending limits are so high that, like, regular folks can't access them. I mean, often they are so high that regular people simply can't do it, and that's why we restrict individual donations, too. But a really secure spending limit of something like \$80,000 in a district – I'm just throwing that out because I know that's the ballpark where some of the federal EDAs are at – you can see yourself organizing to actually get that money. But the higher it is, the more out of reach that seems to be, and that's why for robust democratic participation, particularly at the individual level, pairing things like contribution limits with spending limits is seen to democratize and make the process accessible for the largest number of people.

Mr. Rutherford: Okay.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Rutherford.

Thank you, Dr. Thomas. That does conclude our time with you this evening. You are welcome to remain on the call and listen to the remainder of the proceedings.

We'll now go to Mr. Roth for our next presenter.

Dr. Thomas: Thank you.

Mr. Roth: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Brian Gregg, are you on the phone?

Mr. Gregg: Yes, I am. Can you hear me?

Mr. Roth: I can hear you great.

Brian Gregg

Mr. Gregg: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. My name is Brian Gregg. Often I'm known as Breezy Brian Gregg.

I'd just like to say that the Alberta Election Finances and Contributions Disclosure Act, in my opinion, is a cumbersome and expensive way to try and solve the problem of big money being used to undemocratically influence the political choices people make. It's basically a body of regulations controlling who can buy how much advertising. The act contains 543 instances of the use of the word "advertising." This opportunity to advertise and consequently influence and manipulate people's commercial and political choices is an opportunity that is available only for the wealthy people and their organizations. That is antidemocratic and also, in my opinion, disgusting.

It has been shown in other jurisdictions, especially in the United States of America, that it is very difficult to prohibit advertising by third parties. Political action committees demand that they have the right to freedom of expression, so consequently they should not be prohibited from advertising. If we want fair elections and a strong democracy, we have to publicly fund access to media content for the purpose of giving all equal access to information and for remunerating the owners and producers of media content based on the public's self-chosen use of media content. Public financing of the media content access industry will displace the need for employing the advertising industry to finance access to media content and consequently severely limit the opportunity to buy advertising.

It is my opinion that this committee should go beyond considering additions and changes to the regulations of the Alberta Election Finances and Contributions Disclosure Act. It should also look into encouraging the government to cost legislation to create a new public service to provide Albertans with access to media content. I would refer to this new public service as the digital public library.

I'm happy to answer any questions on how the service would work, what it would cost, what savings and benefits it would produce beyond strengthening the democratic process. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Gregg. Just over two minutes. Excellent.

We'll now go to questions beginning with the government side, first with Mr. Sigurdson. Mr. Sigurdson, whenever you begin speaking is when we'll begin the timer.

Mr. Sigurdson: Excellent. Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'll just ask a couple of questions relating to advertisements, and maybe I can get your thoughts. Do you believe that the government should be banned from running partisan advertisements in a certain time frame leading up or close to an election? Do you think those should be restricted, something that should be a part of a move to restrict any kind of partisan advertisement in an election period?

Mr. Gregg: Well, I don't know if you understand what I was talking about here, but my basic thing is that regulation is not the most efficient and practical solution. The solution is to limit the opportunity to advertise by giving people access to content without using the advertising industry to finance those services. Like, right now we depend on private commercial services that monetize with advertising to get our information; therefore, it creates a huge opportunity with people with money to buy advertising and

influences. If there was a little opportunity to advertise, we wouldn't have to worry about prohibiting people from advertising. That's the point I'm trying to make. I know it's a very different way of thinking about looking at the problem, but that's my opinion. I've given a lot of consideration over the years as to why we should be financing our communications with the advertising industry.

Thank you. Does that explain that?

The Chair: Go ahead. Do you have a follow-up, Mr. Sigurdson?

Mr. Sigurdson: No. That's great. Thank you, Chair.

The Chair: We have about 17 seconds left. Mr. Rutherford, a very quick question, with a very quick answer, Mr. Gregg.

Mr. Rutherford: I'll try to be fast. You talk about big money being able to influence people in advertising, but Facebook and other social media platforms can do it for relatively cheap or no cost. What are your feelings on people being able to use that to influence voters?

Mr. Gregg: Again, I'm not proposing that we should try and regulate foreign private corporations. I'm saying that we should take the business away from them by making our own service, a digital public library that would be a search engine, a social media. Everything that was advertising free so that people can do what they want, get their information without have paid-for messages interrupting them and targeting them.

The Chair: Okay. Thank you for that.

We'll now go the opposition caucus for a two-minute question and answer. Mr. Roth doesn't have anyone from the opposition caucus. If you'd like to speak . . .

Member Ceci: I can. Sorry.

The Chair: I was going to ask to go to the phone next. Mr. Ceci, when you start . . .

Member Ceci: Oh. I apologize.

The Chair: No, no. Not a problem. We're all getting used to this new system a little bit.

Member Ceci: Mr. Gregg, it really seems to me like you're talking, and maybe you use these same words: democratizing, making available information for people regardless of their position. What do you think the outcome of that over time would be in our province?

Mr. Gregg: Well, I think that it would lower the cost of living because people would be exposed to a lot less advertising, so the effect of advertising creating artificial demand and raising prices would go away. I also think that it would really help cut our costs of education because having textbooks free and available for students would be very good. I think it would be, all around, many benefits for people of Alberta.

Member Ceci: Great. Thank you very much.

I'm going to turn it over to Mr. Dang if he wants.

The Chair: With one minute remaining.

Mr. Dang: Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you, Brian, for presenting tonight. I guess that I just wanted to ask you a little bit about your thoughts on the process and influence of corporations and their advertising. I know you talked a little bit about

democratizing access to information and having more public access to people with that information. Maybe you can talk about how having the other entities advertising affects the democratic process.

Mr. Gregg: I think it's a no-brainer, Thomas, that people wouldn't be spending billions of dollars on advertising if it didn't work. Democracy is supposed to be one person, one vote, not, like, how many friends you have with a lot of money that's going to decide who people are going to vote for. Of course, I think it's bad that big money is influencing our elections with advertising. We've seen the circus going on in this election that just took place in the United States and the media circus going on. I think that what I'm proposing, I know, is not a normal thing to be proposing, but I think it's time we started thinking about really what's going on, like: why do we finance our communications with advertising?

7:20

The Chair: Okay. Thank you, Mr. Gregg. That concludes our time with you, Mr. Gregg. Thank you very much for joining us this evening. I appreciate you giving us your input.

Mr. Gregg: Thank you very much for this experience. Thank you very, very much.

The Chair: Absolutely. You're welcome to stay online for the remainder of the proceedings, but we'll now go to our next presenter.

Mr. Roth, go ahead, please.

Mr. Roth: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Joel French.

Joel French

Mr. French: Hi there. Thanks so much. Thank you, Mr. Chair. Thank you to the committee members for taking the time to listen to me for a couple of minutes tonight. My name is Joel French. I'm the executive director at Public Interest Alberta. I think there are a wide array of topics that my organization cares about related to these two pieces of legislation. But given the time constraint, I thought I would take the time to go into a little bit more depth on just one issue, and that's our system of voting. My organization strongly believes that we need to consider a different system of voting that would yield proportional results to the way that Albertans vote, and in order to illustrate why, I wanted to go over just a few of the 2019 election results for each party and to talk about why I think each of the parties has an interest in this.

I'll start with one of the parties that isn't around the table, and that's the Alberta Party, which placed third in the election as far as the popular vote goes. Well, the Alberta Party finished the 2019 election with 9 per cent of the vote across Alberta, including about 9 per cent in Edmonton and Calgary, yet their supporters in either city or across the province didn't receive any seats to represent them in the Legislature.

In Calgary specifically, the NDP got 34 per cent of the vote in the city of Calgary yet received only 12 per cent of the seats. In Calgary the UCP got 53 per cent of the vote yet received 88 per cent of the seats. The reverse is true in Edmonton. In Edmonton the NDP got 53 per cent of the vote, and that gave the NDP 95 per cent of the seats in the city of Edmonton. The UCP in Edmonton got 35 per cent of the vote yet got only 5 per cent of the seats, just one seat. I mean, to me, that's a pretty clear illustration of why, I guess, if I'm an NDP supporter in Calgary, I'm not happy with the representation I've got because it doesn't represent how my city voted. If I'm a UCP supporter in Edmonton, I'm severely underrepresented. I've

got one MLA in the city that represents a party I support even though 35 per cent of the people in my city . . .

The Chair: Mr. French, you're welcome to finish that thought very quickly, sir.

Mr. French: Yeah. There are several systems of voting that would make election results better reflect the makeup in our Legislature. Most countries in the developed world have voting systems that produce results that are proportionate to the way citizens vote, so there are options out there. The solutions are clear. We need you, our elected officials, to publicly acknowledge that this is a problem and commit to finding a solution to it.

Thanks so much for your time tonight.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. French.

We'll now go the opposition caucus first with questions. I understand Ms Pancholi is on the line. Ms Pancholi, whenever you start, we will begin the clock.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you, Mr. French, for your comments today. Just at the tail end there you started to talk about options, and I'm wondering what form of, I guess, electing officials – based, I'm guessing, on a proportional representation model, have you given some thought as to what model you would support?

Mr. French: Yeah. On a personal level I like a mixed member proportional system, but my organization, frankly, would support most of the models that would be proportional. I think we do have to maintain some local representation. There are systems of proportional representation that take away some of that local part. I think we do need to keep some of that local part, so mixed member proportional is a system that, I think, strikes a pretty good balance between those two things.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you, Mr. French.

While I think that I have a good understanding, would you mind just giving a quick overview of what you mean by mixed member representation?

Mr. French: Yeah. This can sometimes be difficult to explain, which I think is why it hasn't happened anywhere in Canada yet. We currently have – take, for example, all of Alberta. We've got 87 seats, right? We could proportion, say, 10 of those seats, or maybe it would have to be 12 of those. It would require either increasing the size of constituencies or increasing the number of seats in the Legislature. I think that a lot of folks have made the point that we have a lot of seats in our Legislature already so probably enlarging some of the constituencies. That other, say, pool of 12 seats: so if you've got 75 – I'm doing this off the top of my head – that are elected by local popular vote, you've got another 12 seats that can be used via party lists of candidates to adjust the results accordingly and make it closer to the proportion of voters across the province. You can have some of those local, say, to a city, so you might have a pool of five seats in Edmonton, five seats in Calgary, and a couple for rural areas to ensure that that's evened out.

The Chair: Okay. We're at the two-minute mark. Excellent.

We'll now go to the government caucus for a two-minute question and answer. We'll begin with Ms Goodridge.

Ms Goodridge: Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you, Mr. French, for your presentation. I'm the MLA for Fort McMurray-Lac La Biche. I'm very proud . . . [An electronic device sounded] Oh, can you hear me? Sorry.

Mr. French: I can hear you.

The Chair: Pause the clock here.

Just getting feedback from someone else's phone. If you are not speaking, if you could mute yourself.

Go ahead, Ms Goodridge.

Ms Goodridge: Apologies. Technology is lovely when it doesn't work.

Anyhow, back to your piece. Being a representative from a northern rural riding, I'm curious how you would have proportional representation put in place that would take into account some of the unique areas that we have in our province.

Furthermore, I'm wondering how you would go about engaging more women and visible minorities and minorities in general in the electoral process.

Mr. French: Yeah. Thank you for the question. Sometimes proportional systems can be tricky as far as how you allocate the seats around the province. I think it would be important that some of those seats be rural and some be urban. Certainly, in the rural areas, you know, maybe, for example – I haven't plotted this out as far as the details go – you'd have one proportional seat that will help to offset the distortions in the north. Maybe you have one in a central region, one in the southern region, and then maybe you have a pool in Edmonton and Calgary. Like I said, I do think it's important that the local representation is maintained so that folks, for example, in Fort McMurray and the surrounding area have your local office to call, but they would also have potentially another office to call. Often those offices would be from opposite parties, which I think – I mean, in an area like the north, where the UCP represents, like, most of the seats, they may have an NDP office to call if enough folks vote for them. Conversely, like I said, UCP supporters in Edmonton would have more UCP options to call.

Sorry. Could you repeat the second question?

The Chair: You know, actually, that is all the time that we have.

Mr. French: Oh, okay. My apologies.

The Chair: No, no. Not a problem. I appreciate you joining us this evening, Mr. French. That is all the time we have with you. Thank you so much for your presentation. You're welcome to stay on the line.

We have our fourth and final presenter.

Mr. Roth.

Mr. Roth: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Bruce Jackson, are you on the phone?

Bruce Jackson

Mr. Jackson: Yes, I'm here. Thank you to everybody for gathering and being in your state in that little room there. I've been following since the first, beginning a few weeks ago, what was going on in these online call-ins. I must say that three minutes or two minutes to make a presentation on issues is a farce.

Secondly, proportional representation. I appreciate the remarks of Melanee Thomas, Mr. Gregg, and Joel French.

Myself, I was going to quote from the UCP letter to the committee: to introduce an end partisan government advertising act that makes it illegal for governments to advertise in the run-up to an election and use tax dollars for partisan ads at that time. That's just being – everybody in the Legislature is always running for office.

I want to talk about specifically the use of public dollars being spent by the war room on Facebook for advertising. I also was very concerned about what the Alberta Proud people brought forward in saying that they've got 190,000 members and that, you know, if each member donates \$100, then you've got \$1.9 million to spend on advertising as a political action party. You can get around it.

I grew up calling myself an entrepreneur, but what's the difference between an entrepreneur and a jailbird? It's that the entrepreneur hasn't been caught yet. Most of the things that are happening in our Legislature tonight can bring forward questionable tactics and questionable reasons for doing what we're doing.

I would draw your attention to a new book coming out tomorrow by Charles Koch on his repentance for what he has done to democracy in America. You might want to pick it up and catch up to date as to what's really going on and go back to . . .

7:30

The Chair: Mr. Jackson, that's all the time we have for now. Could you maybe quickly finish that thought, and I mean very quickly? Then we'll go on to the question and answer.

Mr. Jackson: Okay. Yeah. I just want to say that there's a lot of discrepancy going on, a lot of actions that need – everything we do has to be seen through a set of values of respect, honesty, and openness.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much. I appreciate that.

Do we have any questions coming from the government side first?

Seeing none – okay – the government will then forgo their two minutes. I'll now go to the opposition caucus for two minutes of question and answer. Anyone on the line?

Okay. Hearing none, Mr. Jackson, I appreciate your time and your presentation. Thank you very much.

Member Ceci: Sorry. I just unmuted. I was trying to find the mute button. I apologize.

Mr. Jackson, thank you very much for your presentation. It was interesting. I'm wondering about how we can improve our democracy with regard to the fundamental principles you talk of. I heard you say that we need to be focused on allowing all people access to our democracy. What are the fundamental principles of that for you?

Mr. Jackson: When you try to engage with your MLAs and your ministers, when you write them letters, you want to have them acknowledged because when they're ignored, you're invalidated

and you get angry. The system working and not answering questions honestly and openly makes the average person very excitable and creates division. People go off and say things they probably shouldn't say.

I've been around Alberta for a long, long time. I've run for three different political parties. I've campaigned, and I've been a municipal politician and provincial Legislature candidate, and I've learned a lot just over the last 50 years. I come with age in watching what's going on. I was in the Legislature the other day when they were presenting the petition on the parks. Here you've got the UCP caucus spending taxpayers' money to produce their little road show. The NDP caucus – it's not the NDP caucus. It's the environmental groups, the very people who have concern for the parks system. You come in with information regarding: the public parks will be removed from parks protection, but they're going to be still under the minister of public lands. These are the kinds of lies and deception that just really get me mad.

Member Ceci: Hey, Mr. Jackson, I think we're going to run out of time. I just want to tell you that . . .

The Chair: Mr. Ceci, unfortunately, Mr. Jackson ran over by a couple of moments.

Member Ceci: Sure. I'm just going to clarify that none of us are in that room – we're all virtually signing into this, so we're all separate – and not to be concerned about COVID, please.

The Chair: Sure. I appreciate you making that clarification, Mr. Ceci.

Mr. Jackson, that concludes the time that we have with you this evening. Thank you for your presentation.

Ladies and gentlemen, we now have heard from those who have registered to present this evening, and we have reached the conclusion of the final virtual public meeting. I'd like to thank all those who have tuned in and participated. It has been enlightening for all those in attendance, I'm certain.

The date of the next meeting will be for the purpose of commencing deliberations in relation to its review of the Election Act and election finances and contributions act, and the date of that meeting has yet to be determined.

At this point in time we will now move to adjourn. Can I get a member to move to adjourn? I'm seeing to my right that Mr. Horner has moved to adjourn. All those in favour of adjourning this meeting, please say aye. Any opposed, please say no. Thank you very much. That motion is carried, and this meeting is adjourned.

Everyone have a wonderful evening.

[The committee adjourned at 7:35 p.m.]

