



Province of Alberta

The 28th Legislature
Second Session

Alberta Hansard

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Issue 9

The Honourable Gene Zwozdesky, Speaker

Legislative Assembly of Alberta The 28th Legislature

Second Session

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Fritz, Yvonne, Calgary-Cross (PC)
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Griffiths, Hon. Doug, Battle River-Wainwright (PC)
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Quadri, Sohail, Edmonton-Mill Woods (PC)
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Woo-Paw, Hon. Teresa, Calgary-Northern Hills (PC)
Xiao, David H., Edmonton-McClung (PC)
Young, Steve, Edmonton-Riverview (PC)

Party standings:

Progressive Conservative: 58

Wildrose: 17

Alberta Liberal: 5

New Democrat: 4

Independent: 3

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Naresh Bhardwaj	Associate Minister – Services for Persons with Disabilities
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Ken Hughes	Minister of Municipal Affairs
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Dave Rodney	Associate Minister – Wellness
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Greg Weadick	Associate Minister – Recovery and Reconstruction for Southeast Alberta
Teresa Woo-Paw	Associate Minister – International and Intergovernmental Relations

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Deputy Chair: Mr. Fox

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Eggen	Quadri
Hehr	Rogers
Kubinec	Rowe
Lemke	Sarich
Luan	Stier
McDonald	

Standing Committee on the Alberta Heritage Savings Trust Fund

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Deputy Chair: Mrs. Jablonski

Amery	Khan
Barnes	Sandhu
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Select Special Ethics Commissioner Search Committee

Chair: Mr. Rogers

Deputy Chair: Mr. Quadri

Blakeman	Leskiw
Eggen	McDonald
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Notley	Young
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Standing Committee on Public Accounts

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Standing Committee on Resource Stewardship

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Bikman	Hale
Bilous	Johnson, L.
Blakeman	Webber
Brown	Xiao
Calahasen	Young
Casey	

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

1:30 p.m.

Monday, March 17, 2014

[The Speaker in the chair]

Prayers

The Speaker: Good afternoon, hon. members.

Let us pray. Dear Lord, help us to renew our strength and to replenish our resolve that we may work as hard as we can to help those who entrusted us to represent them. May wisdom, patience, and civility guide our speech and our actions in this regard. Amen.

Please remain standing for the singing of our national anthem as led by Mr. Robert Clark.

Hon. Members:

O Canada, our home and native land!
True patriot love in all thy sons command.
With glowing hearts we see thee rise,
The True North strong and free!
From far and wide, O Canada,
We stand on guard for thee.
God keep our land glorious and free!
O Canada, we stand on guard for thee.
O Canada, we stand on guard for thee.

The Speaker: Thank you, Mr. Clark.

Thank you, members. Please be seated.

Introduction of Visitors

The Speaker: Hon. Member for Airdrie, you have a visitor today?

Mr. Anderson: I do, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to introduce to you and through you to all members of this Assembly somebody who's very well known in these parts, a gentleman that I'm sure many of us are friends with. Mr. Brent Rathgeber was a member of this Assembly from 2001 to 2004, representing Edmonton-Calder. He has had a successful legal career and is currently serving his second term as the Member of Parliament for Edmonton-St. Albert. It's great to see him back in the Legislature today. I invite Mr. Rathgeber to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

Introduction of Guests

The Speaker: Hon. members, let us begin with school groups.

The hon. Premier.

Ms Redford: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. It really is a pleasure to rise today. You know, I've had the privilege of being an MLA for six years, but this is the first time since I became an MLA that a school group from my constituency has visited the Legislature. I am very pleased today to introduce the grade 6 class from Lycée Louis Pasteur, which is the school right across the street from my house, and it's a class of students that I've known since they were three years old. The reason for that is that this group of students have grown up with my daughter, Sarah, who is in this group today. They are up this week to attend the School at the Legislature. I will tell you that while we had many exciting discussions about politics last week, they have been truly excited about being here, being at the Legislature, and learning everything that they can. They're looking forward to the week very much. I'd like to ask them to stand along with their teacher and parent

chaperones Stephen Doubt, Franz Plangger, and Mme Reka Lhuillier to receive the warm welcome of this House.

The Speaker: Hon. Premier, did you have a second introduction as well?

Ms Redford: Well, actually, Mr. Speaker, I have two more introductions. One is with a group of people that are sitting in your gallery. It is my pleasure today to stand to introduce a great student leader, and that is Michelle Hoover. Michelle Hoover is a grade 12 student from Delia, Alberta. She was named the 2013 4-H Premier award winner for her outstanding dedication to 4-H in Alberta. We visited earlier today. She has been a 4-H member for nine years. She has certainly served in the organization in a number of different positions. She has been active in her community organizing student carnivals, being on the yearbook committee at her school. There are only two people on that committee right now, so her leadership is very important. Minister Olson and I had an opportunity to meet with her and her family earlier today. She is incredibly inspiring. The one question she asked me is: what are we doing as a government to ensure that young people go back to agriculture? We had a very good discussion about that. It's a great question. I am so glad along with everyone here to be able to recognize someone who is such a strong, publicly spirited leader. Congratulations, and good luck with whatever you decide to do next.

The Speaker: Thank you. Your final introduction, please.

Ms Redford: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you for the indulgence of the House. There is no doubt that there are many things that I've been very proud to do in this House, but this is my first opportunity in this House to introduce my daughter, Sarah Jermyn, who can stand, please. I think that there are an awful lot of things in our life that we think we are proud of, but there is nothing that I am prouder of in my life than being the mother of this incredible young lady, who is now, actually, officially taller than me and takes great pride in everything that we do as a family. Her father and I are so proud of her. She is my friend. She is my supporter. She is certainly my daughter. She gives me tremendous advice, is actively engaged in politics, in public policy on Facebook and on Twitter. I will say that there is nothing more important to me in the world. Every decision that I make, I make with her in mind. I would like her to rise again and have my love and know how much I love her. I can't say anything more. You're wonderful.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood, followed by the Deputy Premier.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Well, it's my pleasure to introduce 19 brilliant students from Norwood school in my constituency of Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood, and they are accompanied by their teachers, Ms Judith Brouwer and Miss Meagan Como. I would ask that they please rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of our Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Premier.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is also my pleasure to rise and introduce to you and through you to members of the Assembly a bright and enthusiastic group of 36 grade 6 students from Brookside elementary school, located in my constituency of Edmonton-Whitemud. There is nothing more enjoyable in this job than having the opportunity to speak with grade 6 students. What

we do today is about tomorrow and the tomorrows after that, and it's about these kids. Having them come to the Legislature and having the opportunity to speak with them is what reminds us of the job that we are doing and what we are doing it for. Accompanying the students are their teachers, Jennifer Hill, Dee Panickar, Miss Hoffman, along with parent helpers Cindy Young, Helen Williams, and Karen Robinson. They are seated in both galleries. I'd ask them to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: Are there other students to be introduced?

If not, then let us move on to the Associate Minister of Wellness, followed by the Associate Minister of IIR.

1:40

Mr. Rodney: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a beautiful day in Alberta and an important month. March is kidney month, and it's an honour to introduce Flavia Robles, from the Kidney Foundation of Canada. I met with her just before question period, and she's a truly inspirational Albertan. Since its creation in 1964 the Kidney Foundation has helped millions of Canadians suffering from kidney failures and other related disorders such as hypertension, diabetes, urinary tract infections, and kidney stones, and it's done so by providing funding, innovative research, and education for kidney-related ailments. It's quite a number: 4,500 Canadians are on organ transplant waiting lists; 80 per cent of those are waiting for kidneys. For people who want to know more and want to help, please visit kidney.ab.ca. I'd like to take this opportunity to thank the entire organization for all their dedication and ask Flavia to now rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Associate Minister of International and Intergovernmental Relations, followed by the leader of the Liberal opposition.

Ms Woo-Paw: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to introduce to you and through you members of the Ethno-Cultural Council of Calgary, an organization that helps facilitate a collective voice for 42 ethnocultural community groups in Calgary. They are concerned about the proposed change to Alberta's Human Rights Act and have travelled from Calgary to listen to discussions this evening on Motion 502. Joining us today are 21 individuals, including members of the ECC board and volunteers, eight members of the ethnocultural coalition of Edmonton, students from various institutions as well as representatives from a number of organizations, including Possibilities in Motion, from the Filipino community; Calgary Connecting Seniors Cultural Council; Men Action Network, the aboriginal community; Women's Centre, the aboriginal community; HIV Community Link, African community; Disability Action Hall; and the connecting elders from ethnocultural communities program. They are seated in the members' gallery, and I ask that they please rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this House.

The Speaker: Thank you.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadowlark, leader of the Liberal opposition, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona.

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly a class of social work students from NorQuest College. They are accompanied by their class instructor, Dorothy Jacques. They represent the diversity of this great province and this great

country, young men and women from all walks of the world and all walks of life who want to make a better world, especially for our children and Alberta families. They're here today to express their desire for reforms to family and community support and the child-in-care system and support for Alberta social workers. They are the angels of society, and as representatives of the future front-line workers in the system I would ask them to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona, followed by Fort Saskatchewan-Vegreville.

Ms Notley: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to rise today and introduce to you and through you to all members of this Assembly my guests from the Alberta Students' Executive Council. ASEC is an advocacy organization representing the interests of almost 200,000 students across Alberta. My guests today are all student leaders at postsecondary institutions across the province, and they include: from the SAIT Students' Association, Kenneth Taylor; the president of the Grande Prairie Regional College Students' Association, my old alma mater, Lydia Sadiq; Martin Cruz, who's the president of the Students' Association of Red Deer College; Andrew Koning, who's the president of the Concordia Students' Association; Teresa Currie, the ASEC stakeholder relations co-ordinator; and Carol Neuman, the executive director of ASEC. I would like them now to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Fort Saskatchewan-Vegreville, followed by Airdrie.

Ms Fenske: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is my pleasure to introduce to you and through you today to all members of the Assembly Kim Ergang and Jason de Vries. Both of these individuals are from my Fort Saskatchewan-Vegreville constituency and own and operate Titan Towing. They are here today to raise awareness for tow truck operator safety on Alberta's roads and highways. It's about education and enforcement. They are in the members' gallery, and I would ask them to both rise and receive the traditional warm greeting of the Assembly.

The Speaker: Hon. Member for Airdrie, I understand your guests are not here yet.

Let's go on to Lacombe-Ponoka, followed by Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. Fox: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm honoured to rise today to introduce to you and through you to all members of this Assembly Brett Fawcett. Brett is a student at Concordia University and lives in Sherwood Park. He's active in politics at the municipal, provincial, and federal levels. An avid reader, Brett's involvement in politics is motivated by reason and deep thought, something all members should take note of. Brett is seated in the gallery, and I'll ask him to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar, followed by the Leader of Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition.

Mr. Dorward: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. When your children get married, you do not know if you're going to get any grandchildren. Fortunately, these three that I'm about to introduce have given Janice and I 10. From Salmon Arm, British Columbia, is Jennifer Henrie, a professional mother of five. Nathan Dorward, my son, is a professional accountant and works at Alberta

Pensions Services Corporation, a father of three. And young Spencer, who I think will help us to get maybe five or six more, is a professional accountant and works at a firm that I founded 20 years ago, Dorward & Company Chartered Accountants, a father of two. If they could please stand and receive the warm welcome of the House.

Ms Smith: Mr. Speaker, to you and through you to all members of this Assembly it is my pleasure to rise today to introduce possibly two of my favourite constituents from Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills. Now, I don't want to create any extra challenge for the Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills, but I do think that they may also be two of his cutest constituents as well. They are joined today by their mom, Tanya Cooper, and their dad, Nathan Cooper, who works very hard for us as Legislative affairs director in our caucus. I would ask Porter, aged six, and Paxton, aged five, to rise and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Glenmore, followed by Edmonton-Calder.

Ms L. Johnson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am very pleased to rise today and introduce to you and through you to all members of this Assembly a group of representatives from the Ethno-Cultural Council of Calgary. This group travelled to Edmonton via bus today to meet with me to express their concerns on Motion 502 and to listen to the debate in the House on the motion. My guests today are Thao Vu, Pol Ngeth, Jason Klinck, Len Chan, Henri Giroux, Saltanat Kermalieva, and Joe Espina. They are seated in both galleries, and I would ask them to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Calder.

Mr. Eggen: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. I'm very pleased to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly Thomas Dang and Donald Ademaj. Thomas is a first-year student at the University of Alberta, studying computer science, and he's part of the Edmonton-Calder NDP constituency executive. Donald is a first-year student at the University of Alberta in science, and he also has a keen interest in Alberta politics, starting with his days as a page in this very Chamber two years ago. I would ask them both to stand and receive the warm traditional welcome of the Assembly.

Members' Statements

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake.

Budget 2014

Mrs. Leskiw: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am pleased to rise today to speak about a recent investment made to support Alberta municipalities. This government recognizes the essential role Alberta's communities play in fuelling our economy and making our province a great place for people to live. We know strategic funding for the province's municipalities contribute to building strong and vibrant communities. Budget 2014 demonstrates the Alberta government's continued investment in municipalities. This budget maintains the government's commitment to invest in families and communities as part of the building Alberta plan.

Mr. Speaker, this morning the Minister of Municipal Affairs announced further details to those budget commitments, which will help our communities thrive and grow to meet the needs of the people who proudly call Alberta home. Over the next three

years the Alberta government will invest \$5.1 billion in municipal infrastructure. This support will flow through programs such as MSI, GreenTRIP, Alberta community partnership, water for life strategy, and the municipal water and waste-water program.

There will be \$162 million more in support for transit over the next three years, and there will be \$150 million more available through MSI. Because public services aren't confined to municipal boundaries, the latest budget will enhance support for regional co-operation with \$20 million more. Our communities will also benefit from significant support through municipal police grants, family and community support services, and many other programs.

Altogether Budget 2014 provides more than \$2 billion in direct funding for municipalities across all ministries. You heard that: \$2 billion. Mr. Speaker, this is not simply about dollar figures. This translates into improved quality of life for Albertans. This is what we mean when we say that we are investing in families and communities.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Hon. members, just before we start question period, please be reminded that you have up to 35 seconds for your question and up to 35 seconds for your answer, and I'll be strictly enforcing that today. Also, please, let's not have any preambles to supplementary questions after the fifth main question, which is held today by the ND opposition leader.

1:50

Oral Question Period

The Speaker: Let us begin, then – start the clock – with the hon. Leader of Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition.

Associate Minister – Family and Community Safety

Ms Smith: Mr. Speaker, the past few days have aired a lot of PC dirty laundry. We have a cabinet minister quitting today, saying that the PCs can't be fixed, and we have an MLA who quit the PC caucus last week because of what he described as bullying. This bullying was on full display on Friday when the minister supposedly responsible for ending bullying made a personal attack against her former colleague. Will any member of the cabinet defend the minister's bullying and dismissive comments?

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Premier.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Bullying in any form is abhorrent, and we should all be setting good examples in that respect. Sometimes when a camera or a microphone is put in front of us and in the heat of the moment, you say things that come out the wrong way. I have been the perpetrator of that myself, for which I would like to apologize. The minister to whom the hon. member refers made some comments which were taken a bit out of context.

The Speaker: Thank you.

Ms Smith: Mr. Speaker, the minister's comments also dismissed electricians as somehow being less valuable than politicians. Now, I think that if you were to ask Albertans who they value more, electricians or PC cabinet ministers, the electricians would win hands down. I know that the Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills, an electrician for 40 years, might agree with me. Our province is facing a major skilled labour shortage. What will the jobs minister do to ensure that his colleague's denigrating and

dismissive comments don't impact our efforts to attract skilled tradespeople?

Mr. Hancock: Two points, Mr. Speaker. First of all, no one is denigrating electricians. The Premier's father is an electrician. Many people are electricians, and tradespeople are represented in this caucus. That was not what the hon. member intended to do, nor should that be taken from her remarks.

What the hon. member said, if you look at the context of her remarks, was that it takes a different temperament to do this job. It was not a denigration of any other job and shouldn't be taken that way. The hon. member apologizes for that remark, and we should move on.

Ms Smith: Mr. Speaker, I think that's what bullies say.

The antibullying minister must know that her comments were unacceptable and reflect the worst of what this government has come to represent, a bullying and intimidating group who is more concerned about entitlements than issues. The minister now lacks all credibility on the issue of ending bullying. Will the Premier give this important responsibility to another minister who will take the task of ending bullying seriously?

Ms Redford: The minister who's responsible for safe families and communities has certainly apologized for the remarks. It was very important. I made some comments this weekend saying that I think there were a lot of comments made last week that were not actually a very high watermark for political conduct in this province. I think when people's emotions do get the best of them, sometimes unfortunate things are said. The best we can do is to apologize and to move on.

The Speaker: The hon. leader. Second main set of questions.

Government Airplane Usage

Ms Smith: Mr. Speaker, I've got another PC fundraiser to ask questions about today. During constituency break last year, on Thursday, May 2, the minister of tourism boarded a plane in Lloydminster. That plane first went to Drumheller, and then it arrived in Edmonton at 5:32 p.m., just in time for the Premier's \$500-a-plate fundraiser at the Shaw Conference Centre. The minister of tourism was photographed with her on stage. To the minister: what government business did he conduct in the 28 minutes before the PC Party fundraiser that required him to fly a government plane to Edmonton?

Dr. Starke: Well, Mr. Speaker, I thank the hon. leader for that question. On that particular date, if I have my dates correct, I was with the Minister of International and Intergovernmental Relations in Drumheller discussing a number of different initiatives in terms of our international strategy. At that point the plane returns to Edmonton, which is its home base. That's where I had to be later that day, so I don't see anything particularly unusual. In fact, I started that day in Edmonton assisting with an announcement with regard to our flights. If I'm not mistaken, it was the new direct link to New York City.

Ms Smith: Mr. Speaker, the Minister of International and Intergovernmental Relations was also on the flight to Edmonton. Now, we have no photos to show that he was at the PC fundraiser, too, but I don't want to assume the worst. In fact, I'd like to give him an opportunity to explain himself, too. So to the IIR minister: what government business did he conduct in Edmonton in the 28 minutes before the PC fundraiser?

Mr. Horner: Mr. Speaker, the hon. minister previous has responded. The planes are based out of Edmonton, so when the flights are terminating, it's actually good policy to have the planes come back to Edmonton, where their home base is, so they don't have to deadhead somewhere else.

Ms Smith: Mr. Speaker, judging by these answers, it's apparent that there was no government business that evening in Edmonton. It's just as apparent that the only reason the two ministers boarded the government plane to come to Edmonton was to go to the PC Party fundraiser in Edmonton that night, another example of the taxpayer subsidizing the governing party. To the President of Treasury Board, who controls the air fleet: will he ask the PC Party to reimburse taxpayers for this expense?

Mr. Horner: Mr. Speaker, as per the hon. member's question the government business wasn't in Edmonton; it was in Drumheller. The plane was coming back to Edmonton because that's where it's based. I'm not exactly sure why anybody would be reimbursing us for getting our own planes back to their own base.

The Speaker: Thank you.

The hon. leader. Third and final main set of questions.

Disaster Recovery Program Claims

Ms Smith: Mr. Speaker, last week the Municipal Affairs minister committed to closing 90 per cent of the disaster recovery program claims in the next 17 days despite the fact that minimal progress has been made in the last nine months. I predicted it would be a mess. Well, it's even messier than I thought. When I asked the minister about this on Thursday, he stuck with the goal of 90 per cent of claims closed by the end of March. But then in a press conference on Friday the minister said that the 90 per cent goal would now be for the end of June. Will the minister clarify for Albertans desperately waiting for DRP news: what is the real target?

Mr. Hughes: Well, you know, Mr. Speaker, this is a really important topic. I appreciate the hon. member's asking the question, and I'm delighted to share the details. There are actually two goals. The first one is that by the end of March the goal is to have 90 per cent of all eligible residential DRP applications completed. That's about 6,160 applications. That's 90 per cent of the eligible residential DRP applications at the end of January.

The second goal is to finish off 90 per cent of all of the rest of the . . .

The Speaker: First supplemental, hon. leader.

Ms Smith: Let me quote from the *High River Times*. "It's been nine months of confusion, woes and concerns with the beleaguered [disaster recovery program] . . . and now everything is allegedly smooth sailing . . . It's hard to believe until it actually occurs." Every flood-affected resident in Alberta who has had to deal with the disaster recovery program knows it is a mess. The next flood season is already here, Minister. It's flooding in Millarville today. How can Albertans have any confidence that this minister will fix things if he can't even get his story straight day after day?

Mr. Hughes: Mr. Speaker, my position on this has been quite clear from day one. In December, when I was asked to take on this responsibility, over Christmas, I appointed a group to be the clearing house for those files that were caught in an insurance hold

as opposed to going forward into the DRP. Then we set the goal of having 90 per cent of all eligible residential files closed by the end of March and 90 per cent of all other eligible files closed by the end of June. So the message is quite clear.

Ms Smith: Mr. Speaker, the minister has been less than clear on this whole mess. Anyone sitting in the Chamber last week was left with the impression that LandLink was fired effective March 31. Then we heard about a transitional contract. Apparently, that transitional contract goes for another 90 days, and it will still not clear all of the files. To the minister: how is LandLink getting paid for this transitional contract, and how many further dollars intended for disaster relief are going to end up in their bank account?

2:00

Mr. Hughes: Well, Mr. Speaker, you need to have somebody administer files. It's either officials of the government of Alberta, of which there are plenty working on this, or officials of the contractor from a contract that was established 20 years ago. It's quite clear that it would be exceedingly disruptive to stop the processing of files that are currently in the system at the end of March just because that's the end of a contract. We need a transitional contract in place in order to ensure that Albertans get the support that they need from the disaster recovery program. They are depending upon it.

Government Policies

Dr. Sherman: Happy St. Paddy's Day, Mr. Speaker. Let's be frank. If there was ever a day when the Premier needed the luck of the Irish, it would be today. After weeks of the Travelgate scandal and defections from caucus, the Premier has been placed on probation by her party. With over 90,000 children living in poverty, many suffering in government care, a crisis in health care access, and not enough schools or teachers for our kids, the Premier has been given a work plan at a time when the government no longer works for Albertans. To the Premier: how can you assure Albertans that your plans have their best interests at heart when your government is working so hard . . .

The Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, I think this is a very important season for Alberta. You'll know that in this Legislature right now we are debating a budget that is the first budget that's been back in the black in five years in Alberta. We know that in Alberta we are creating more than 75 per cent of the jobs that are created in Canada. The Canadian Federation of Independent Business says that this is the best place in the country to start a business. We've seen family income go up. We've seen revenues go up. We've made a \$10 billion investment in schools, roads, and hospitals. The future is bright, and that . . .

Dr. Sherman: Mr. Speaker, that budget was an over-under budget, where Albertans were overtaxed and underserved by their government.

The Premier likes to talk about the building Alberta plan. One former member of her caucus called it the bullying Alberta plan. Another former member called it the hurting Alberta plan. This government has slashed the seniors' drug plan by 25 per cent, waged war on workers' rights and public service pensions, and spent all our oil wealth in one generation. To the Premier: when will you stop your penny-wise and pound-foolish approach to governing and listen to Albertans who want you to realize that the

only cost they want you to cut is your government's extravagance?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, in the last election Albertans said: we know that we live in a wonderful province, and we know we're lucky to live here, but what are we doing for the future? I'll tell you that the throne speech and the budget that we set out two weeks ago did that. It funded heritage scholarship funds. It put in place an endowment fund for access to the future. It added an endowment fund for agricultural innovation. It will create a new institute for innovation. That is economic diversification, economic growth, and investing in generations for years to come.

Dr. Sherman: Mr. Speaker, this province and this economy are great despite government policy, and that Speech from the Throne seemed more like a eulogy for a tired, old government.

Another part of the Premier's hurting Alberta plan has left public education severely underfunded. Her government scheme is to build trailer schools and cram as many students and as few teachers as possible into those schools. Alberta Liberals would make schools as community hubs. Teachers, trustees, parents, and students like the idea. To the Premier: why won't you listen to those very Albertans who won you your leadership and election campaigns and make schools as community hubs part of your work plan?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, I think it's wonderful that the Alberta Liberal Party has adopted the Progressive Conservative education plan. You know, in the last three years we've had communities talking about the fact that schools matter and that schools need to be more than community hubs. In fact, our MLA for Calgary-Bow is working very closely right now with her constituents on exactly that initiative because this is what matters. What's great is that that's what school board trustees want, that's what parents want, that's what the Minister of Education wants, and that's what this Progressive Conservative caucus wants.

The Speaker: The hon. leader of the ND opposition, followed by Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo.

Government Effectiveness

Mr. Mason: Thanks very much. Mr. Speaker, the province has been transfixed by the drama engulfing the government party and caucus. While internal party affairs cannot be the subject of question period, the effectiveness of government certainly can. I regret having to ask this question, but it must be asked. To the Premier: do you have enough support to keep governing? [some applause]

Ms Redford: Well, Mr. Speaker, all I can do is thank the hon. member for his question.

Mr. Mason: Nice show of unity there, Tories.

The Premier says that she was given a work plan by the PC executive. If so, Albertans want to know how this plan will influence the actions of the government. To the Premier: will this work plan affect in any way what this government does or how they do it?

Ms Redford: In fact, I am very proud to be the leader of the Progressive Conservative Party and to be the Premier of this province as a result of that. I'll tell you, Mr. Speaker, that every single day that we work as a caucus, we work to make things better for Albertans. That's what we do as members of the

Progressive Conservative Party, that's what we'll continue to do, and as we continue to work in alignment, that's what allows Alberta to continue to grow.

Mr. Mason: I think we should have another standing ovation, Mr. Speaker. I didn't get a count of all of the ones that stayed in their seats.

This PC government is clearly struggling to govern in the midst of its internal crisis. Sudden reversals by the Premier, snap funding announcements, and an idling legislative agenda are all evidence of paralysis in this government. To the Premier: given the impact of the PC crisis on your government, how will you ensure that the public's business gets done?

Ms Redford: Mr. Speaker, I don't know what the hon. member is talking about in terms of surprise funding announcements. What I'll tell you is that we presented a budget and a go-forward plan for this government, for this province. It's investing in schools; it's investing in hospitals; it's investing in shelters. Those are the announcements we're making today because those are the announcements that Albertans asked us to make to show that we were investing in the future. So if the hon. member is surprised by these, I'd suggest he reads the budget.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo, followed by Calgary-Fish Creek.

Highway 881

Mr. Allen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In October 2012 this government announced \$318 million to be earmarked for improvements to highway 881, including the construction of passing lanes, safety rest areas to accommodate oversized loads, and access to highway 69 for enhanced safety. In 2013 this project was deferred due to fiscal constraints. The government has announced this year that we have a balanced budget and that we have a much rosier financial outlook, yet the project has not been shown in the 2014 budget. To the Minister of Transportation: when will this project be brought back so that the construction. . .

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Transportation.

Mr. Drysdale: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This government is working hard to twin highway 63, a road that parallels this road. We're spending almost a billion dollars on this project that twins this highway. Besides, we're finishing completing the ring roads around Edmonton and a major, substantial ring road in Calgary. This department is building Alberta.

The Speaker: First supplemental, hon. member.

Mr. Allen: Thank you. To the same minister: given that the government's priorities are focused on market access and growing revenues, does the minister plan to achieve those objectives by investing in necessary infrastructure such as highway 881?

Mr. Drysdale: Of course, Mr. Speaker. I just listed some of the projects that we're investing in to help this province get our product to market. Highway 881 is an important link in infrastructure, but there are lots of important links in this province, and we'll work diligently to get them all done.

The Speaker: Final supplemental.

Mr. Allen: Thank you. Again to the same minister: given that there's an emerging consensus that an eastern bypass route across the Clearwater River will open up new oil sands opportunities, hence helping us grow revenues while reducing oversized loads and dangerous goods that travel every day through the middle of Fort McMurray, will the minister bring funding to the table to enable this to proceed?

Mr. Drysdale: Mr. Speaker, as I said, we'll work with all municipalities to help that happen, and I'm sure this hon. member will agree that twinning highway 63 up there will help that progress along. The wide loads will have a better access with a twinned highway.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Fish Creek, followed by Calgary-Bow.

Misericordia Community Hospital

Mrs. Forsyth: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Misericordia community hospital in Edmonton is in dire shape: leaky pipes, downed elevators, and an intensive care unit that is only available based on the weather. When it rains, the place leaks and services shut down, patients lie on stretchers and gurneys in the halls, and even renovated bathrooms are not equipped to be barrier free. The Health minister acknowledges that the Misericordia needs to be replaced. In last week's budget nothing was presented in the capital plan to fix the Misericordia. My question is to the Minister of Infrastructure. Why isn't it on the list?

2:10

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health.

Mr. Horne: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Well, I'm glad the hon. member is raising this again because it gives me another opportunity to tell the hon. member and all Albertans that we are committed to working with the Misericordia, with Covenant Health to complete critical infrastructure repairs. There is currently over \$19 million that has been allocated for these repairs. About \$6.2 million has already been spent on things like upgrades to elevators and the electrical system. We've asked Covenant Health for their estimate of what other funding will be needed over the next 3 to 5 years for this . . .

The Speaker: First supplemental, hon. member.

Mrs. Forsyth: Thank you, Minister. Given that the Misericordia was slated for a rebuild or replacement six years ago and given that in 2010 AHS had a \$100.1 million approved budget for the Misericordia but placed the project on hold, can the Minister of Infrastructure explain why the project was deferred? Where is that money now?

Mr. McIver: Well, Mr. Speaker, I find it interesting that the member opposite is against us getting the best value for the infrastructure that exists in Alberta. I'm a little perplexed also. They don't seem to like the fact that we're spending \$19 million to keep it going and keep it in a good, safe condition for patients and Albertans so that we can continue to get the very best value for Albertans. On one hand, they say: don't spend so much money. On the other hand: it's a spending day; it's a spending day; it's a spending day. When they finally decide what they do want, we'd be happy to hear about it.

The Speaker: Final supplemental, hon. member.

Mrs. Forsyth: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Minister, it's about patient safety. That was brought up six years ago.

Given that the Misericordia is now AHS's second most important new project and given that the costs have increased since the minister pulled the hundred million in approved funding, will the minister enlighten us on what the new costs are now to replace the Misericordia?

Mr. Horne: Well, Mr. Speaker, first of all, let's be clear. Alberta Health Services has made a number of high-priority recommendations for renovation and replacement of aging hospitals in this province. The Misericordia is one of those hospitals. What the hon. member doesn't do, of course, today as part of her question is talk about the \$1.3 billion that was spent to build the South Health Campus facility in Calgary. As I've said, we are working together as ministries to determine the ongoing hospital capital infrastructure needs for Edmonton and the capital region, and a decision about a new facility . . .

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Bow, followed by Innisfail-Sylvan Lake.

School Growth Pressures in Calgary

Ms DeLong: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. The Calgary neighbourhoods of West Springs, Aspen Woods, and Cougar Ridge are in desperate need of a new school. Nearly 5,000 parents signed a petition, that I presented in the House last week, advocating for new schools in their neighbourhoods. So my first question is to the Minister of Education. Given the release of the Calgary board of education capital plan list today, putting the West Springs-Cougar Ridge middle school as the number one priority, can the minister tell these 5,000 parents and the House when we can expect an announcement regarding new schools in these neighbourhoods?

Mr. J. Johnson: Mr. Speaker, I want to commend this MLA for being such a great advocate for her community, first of all. She had a whole group of parents in the Legislature last week, and I was happy to meet with those as this MLA requested that, and we had a really good discussion. I know they've done a lot of good work, including lobbying to get this to number one on the CBE's list. Obviously, everyone knows that this government has invested a lot in schools over the last couple of months, I think 10 in Calgary in February and 10 in Calgary in the spring of 2013, but beyond that commitment we're going to look forward and try to get more and more schools on the capital list.

The Speaker: First supplemental, hon. member.

Ms DeLong: Thank you. To the same minister: given that parents have been told that their children cannot be registered in their local West Springs school this September because they cannot count on getting portables by then, would the minister please first confirm that he has approved these portables for this school?

Mr. J. Johnson: Mr. Speaker, yeah, I can speak to that. Once again, because of this Premier, instead of having the budget to provide only about 40 portables a year, she's bumped this up so that we can have the budget to provide over a hundred portables a year because we recognize the growth pressures. This is one of the schools that's going to benefit from that. We know that we've got about 16 modules going to Calgary, and my understanding is that two of those are going to the area where she has requested.

The Speaker: Final supplemental.

Ms DeLong: Thank you very much. My final question is to the hon. Minister of Infrastructure. Can the minister please confirm that these approved portables will arrive for the fall semester and be fully operational?

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Infrastructure.

Mr. McIver: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. What I can tell the hon. member is that we have a contract with the supplier. [interjections] The contract specifies they're to be delivered in July and completed and ready for students in August because that's the time when we expect that students are going to be there because every September they show up.

So we have a plan. It's part of the building Alberta plan. [interjections] These portables are, as I said, part of that, and we expect them to be delivered and providing the services that Alberta parents and students need.

The Speaker: Thank you.

Please keep the noise level down. Let's go on.

Protection of Persons in Care

Mrs. Towle: Mr. Speaker, the latest protection of persons in care report paints an alarming picture. There were 166 complaints of abuse that were founded and involved vulnerable Albertans in care. But these are only the high-level numbers. Albertans don't know the real details. Each of these abuse cases was investigated, which means there are recommendations from each and every one. Again, those are not public. To the Health minister: how can you possibly learn from these horrific cases of abuse when you're concealing the recommendations to improve?

Mr. Horne: Well, Mr. Speaker, we discussed this issue last week, and as the hon. member knows and as I've said to the House many times, we take all of the complaints that are made under this act very, very seriously. It is true that in 2012-2013 there were 470 reports. A significant number of those were determined to be founded complaints. We're following up very closely on each one of those. As I said, I've directed my ministry to put in place a process to ensure that the recommendations are implemented.

Mrs. Towle: You also delayed the report by nine months, Minister.

Given that the Health minister has shared these reports with the associate ministers and the ministers that are affected, one can assume, and given that those ministers are responsible to protect vulnerable Albertans in care, why has the Minister of Human Services or the associate minister of PDD not acted immediately on those reports and made the recommendations public?

Mr. Horne: Well, Mr. Speaker, as the acting minister for the Minister of Human Services today nothing could be further from the truth. We discuss all of these reports in detail. Ministers, regardless of whether it's my ministry or the Ministry of Human Services, take the recommendations very seriously, and we will ensure and have ensured that those are implemented.

Mrs. Towle: It would be nice if Albertans could see those recommendations so they know where to put their people in care.

Given that the Protection for Persons in Care Act also applies to several individuals in the persons with developmental disabilities programs, what is the associate minister for PDD going to do to

ensure that those vulnerable Albertans who fall under his mandate are not subject to the same kind of abuse?

The Speaker: The hon. associate minister for persons with developmental disabilities.

Mr. Bhardwaj: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Abuse of any kind makes me sick to my stomach. We have taken recommendations from the PPI, and we will be recommending and we will be implementing all of them. It is unfortunate that incident happened. We take that very, very seriously. We are taking every single recommendation, and we will be implementing those recommendations.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre, followed by Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview.

Athabasca River Water Quality

Ms Blakeman: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. For years and years and years we've said that something is wrong in the Athabasca River, but the government continued to deny, deny, deny that millions of litres of toxic tailings yuck was and is leaking into the groundwater and then into the Athabasca River. The most recent Environment Canada report confirmed this. To the environment minister: why did the government repeatedly ignore calls to look into concerns that these leaks were affecting the environment, wildlife, and people's health?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Campbell: Well, thank you. I can say to you that we take very seriously all of our monitoring up in the oil sands area of the province and especially around Fort McMurray, Fort MacKay, and Fort Chipewyan. Mr. Speaker, I can stand and say to you that we are continuing to put more monitoring in place and we'll continue to do so, working with the federal government to make sure that we do a proper job monitoring now and into the future.

The Speaker: First supplemental.

Ms Blakeman: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. Back to the same minister: if the government was so concerned, why didn't it insist that directive 074 be fully implemented; that is, stop creating new tailings ponds and phase out, get rid of, the old ones as conditions for allowing more developmental permits?

The Speaker: The hon. minister responsible.

Mr. Campbell: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I say to you that we are working closely with industry, and industry is doing a very good job of putting money into technology and research to make sure that we don't have to develop tailings ponds in the future. I can say to you that I've had very good discussions with industry, and when our tailings ponds framework comes out, I have made it very clear to industry that we are going to expedite the cleanup of our tailings ponds.

2:20

Ms Blakeman: Oh, good grief. Not another directive thing.

Okay. To the same minister: how can the government ensure proper environmental data quality when CEMA and other environmental science based agencies are now dependent on funding from industry, especially when we've had the example of industry pulling their funding from CEMA not once but twice?

Mr. Campbell: Well, Mr. Speaker, industry hasn't pulled their funding from CEMA. As a matter of fact, they're committed to pay for CEMA this year and into next year. I can say to you that when we bring AEMERA into place, which is the Alberta monitoring agency, again, we will have good science. We are engaging with all of our scientists from the University of Alberta, the University of Calgary, and from around this country to make sure that we get it right. I can say to you that we are committed to making sure we do a good job up in the oil sands region.

Drilling in Urban Areas

Mr. Bilous: Mr. Speaker, for years Albertans have watched this PC government bend over backwards to help industry make huge profits at the expense of the environment and community safety. Today 11,000 citizens of Lethbridge, just to name one city, delivered a petition calling on this government to help protect their homes, schools, playgrounds from harmful drilling. To the Minister of Municipal Affairs: when will you listen to the people of Alberta and their municipal leaders and stop allowing risky drilling in urban areas?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mrs. McQueen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the member for the question. I want to say that we've been listening very, very carefully to our two MLAs from the area, to the mayor of the community as well, making sure that the environmental concerns from their communities are able to be addressed with me. I've talked to the mayor myself. We're going to meet. We're also looking at an urban drilling policy. We're working on that piece right now. What is important for me is the safety of Albertans, all Albertans.

Mr. Bilous: Mr. Speaker, given that there are still no clear rules on drilling in urban areas and given that this PC government has been promising an urban drilling strategy since 2012, when Calgary faced the same threat that Lethbridge does today, to the Minister of Energy: when will we finally get to see this policy, and why has it taken so long?

The Speaker: The Minister of Energy again.

Mrs. McQueen: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Indeed, we do have policies about drilling in this province, whether they be for urban or rural, and I have made a commitment to look at the policies, review the policies, and bring forward different stakeholders, municipalities and other stakeholders, so that we can look at those policies, first of all, so that everyone is aware what policies we do have in place. Whether we live in rural Alberta or we live in urban Alberta, it's important for all of us to have policies for safe drilling.

Mr. Bilous: Tick-tock, tick-tock, Minister.

Mr. Speaker, given that without this policy the government and regulators continue to make up rules on the fly in the backroom and given the strong opposition from Albertans, including in Lethbridge the mayor and city council, the chamber of commerce, and both school boards, to the Minister of Municipal Affairs: will the minister commit that changes to the Municipal Government Act will include a prohibition on drilling in urban areas, and if not, why not?

Mrs. McQueen: Well, again thank you for the question. What's important to note, Mr. Speaker, in this particular case is that there

has been no application put forward to the Alberta Energy Regulator, so the citizens are having the opportunity to bring their concerns first and foremost to their two outstanding MLAs – the mayor is able to talk with myself as well – and to be able to talk about those. But, quite frankly, there is no application before the regulator at this point.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Cardston-Taber-Warner, followed by Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Cardston Hospital Renovation

Mr. Bikman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As AHS knows, the Cardston hospital has exceeded its best-by date. The main structure is over 60 years old, and it's been 33 years since the last renovations were done. As the minister may appreciate, since the doctors and the people of Cardston were told in 1999 that they were next in line to receive a new facility, the government's promises lack just a little bit of credibility. What will the minister do to reassure them that this critical new hospital will actually be built?

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health.

Mr. Horne: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the hon. member for the question. The Cardston hospital is one of a number of hospitals in Alberta that were built in that particular area that require renovation and in some cases replacement. I think the hon. member knows that this particular project is on the five-year list that Alberta Health Services has established. I recognize the importance of the facility to the community. That is where the project stands at present.

The Speaker: First supplemental.

Mr. Bikman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Of course, in 1999 it was next in line, so being on the five-year list may not be as reassuring as we'd like it to be.

Given that Cardston is fortunate to have dedicated and skilled doctors, nurses, and support personnel to serve the thousands of people in the town and area as well as about 10,000 people on the largest First Nations reserve in Canada, will the minister tell us when Cardston will be getting this long-promised hospital?

Mr. Horne: Well, Mr. Speaker, as I'm sure the hon. member appreciates, we are not living in the 1970s, in an era where in most of Canada and certainly in Alberta we sought to have full-service hospitals with all programs and services in every community across the province. Alberta Health Services is undertaking very detailed planning at the zone level now about what the roles of hospitals will be, and they will all play specialized roles in the future. As the hon. member knows, AHS has recognized the need for physical renovation of the facility and will continue to work toward putting the right project in . . .

The Speaker: Final supplemental.

Mr. Bikman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We're counting on that, of course, Mr. Minister.

While it seems to make sense that doctors and health care professionals in Cardston would be consulted and that their recommendations would actually be listened to, this hasn't been done so far. What will the minister do to make sure that this actually happens?

Mr. Horne: Well, Mr. Speaker, I'm really actually grateful to the hon. member for raising this point. As I've said in this House before, we believe, I believe that there is a greater role that health advisory councils can play in this province in terms of long-term community planning for health infrastructure, providing feedback on services that are provided at the local level. What I am committed to do is to work with Alberta Health Services and those council members to expand their role, to provide them a greater voice in the kind of planning that the hon. member is talking about. I think that's very worth while.

The Speaker: Thank you.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar, followed by Little Bow.

Municipal Charters

Mr. Dorward: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We've been hearing and hearing and hearing and hearing and the MLA for Edmonton-Centre has also been asking these kinds of questions surrounding the city charter framework agreement, but we haven't seen any details outside of conversations, in fact, in the media. To the Minister of Municipal Affairs: can't you at least release a framework of the agreement to the public?

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Municipal Affairs.

Mr. Hughes: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. You know, we have a very constructive engagement with the mayors of the two big cities in this province. They have a very positive approach to working together with the government of Alberta. I'm very pleased to say that we will be making good progress, and we're a matter of weeks away from demonstrating the progress that all of this good work has accumulated to date.

Mr. Dorward: Well, I'm happy to hear that we're weeks away now. What are the objectives of that agreement? Can you give us some more beef as to that, Minister?

Mr. Hughes: Well, Mr. Speaker, the Municipal Government Act is also under review, and that's something that municipal officials and other stakeholders around the province are very interested in and are engaging in a very open process throughout the province this spring. That is not unrelated to the working relationship with the two large cities, you know, those cities that have more than three quarters of a million citizens, have greater capacity, have greater ability to do stuff, and have the opportunity to provide leadership for their own respective communities.

Mr. Dorward: Let's cut right to the chase. Can you speak to the concern that affects myself, in that people are talking about new taxation powers being given specifically to Calgary and Edmonton?

Mr. Hughes: Mr. Speaker, it's clear the hon. member is an accountant, and I'm very pleased to have his question. All of us as citizens are focused on the fact that there really is only one taxpayer at the end of the day. This is not a conversation so much about new revenue sources. If there were any, I'd speculate about the need for possibly having a plebiscite about them, but there aren't necessarily any in the works. What we're really talking about is how we ensure that citizens get the services that they are entitled to and that . . .

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Little Bow, followed by Fort Saskatchewan-Vegreville.

Bridge Maintenance and Repair

Mr. Donovan: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Alberta Transportation has been looking after the local bridge funding program for many years and promised to build infrastructure in this province. They've now decided to pass the costs on to municipalities. Many of these bridges are 50 to 75 years old and need repairs. Downloading the cost to already overstretched municipalities is not fair and also places essential emergency services delivery at risk. Can the Minister of Transportation explain why his government is putting rural Albertans at risk by failing to maintain adequate levels of service for bridge funding?

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Transportation.

Mr. Drysdale: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and I thank that member for a good policy question. A year ago we had to make some tough decisions in the budget and save some money, and unfortunately we zero-funded the strategic infrastructure program, which included the bridge funding for municipalities. Being a councillor from a rural municipality I know how important that program is. But we also increased funding to the basic . . .

2:30

The Speaker: First supplemental.

Mr. Donovan: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that the AAMD and C has called to increase funding "to a level that reflects the needs of the community, agricultural sector and local industry," why will this government not come back to the table, agree to a second round of meetings with the AAMD and C to ensure that rural Albertans are not put at risk by the deteriorating roads and infrastructure in our ridings?

Mr. Drysdale: Mr. Speaker, I can assure you that I meet regularly with my colleagues at AAMD and C, and I know the pressures that they've come under. Over the past three years this province has set aside \$35 million each year, a total of \$105 million, for bridge maintenance and preservation on provincial highways, a vast majority of which are in rural ridings.

The Speaker: Final supplemental, hon. member.

Mr. Donovan: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the minister of agriculture: given that the recent grain transportation crisis in Alberta affects farmers' access to markets, with even a press release just hours ago promoting what the rail service should now do, is this minister concerned that his government's lack of commitment for essential road infrastructure will complicate more problems for agricultural producers getting their products to market?

The Speaker: The hon. minister of agriculture.

Mr. Olson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to thank the member for the question. Obviously, transportation is very important to agriculture. That's why we've been so active in recent weeks in our advocacy after listening to our producers. Roads are equally important. I have the ear of the Minister of Transportation. We talk regularly. We're also planning a meeting with the AAMD and C, hopefully this week. I would note, though, that the Auditor General's report just a year ago indicated that their finding was that our bridges were safe, so we're not talking about a safety issue. But we still are very . . .

The Speaker: First supplemental.

Mr. Donovan: I'll try it again if you want.

The Speaker: Oh, I'm sorry. I was distracted. My apologies.
Fort Saskatchewan-Vegreville, followed by Calgary-Fish Creek.

Tow Truck Driver Safety

Ms Fenske: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Alberta's roads and highways are busy, and tow truck operators are often called in to assist with emergency situations, putting them in harm's way and at a dangerous risk of being struck by passing vehicles. My first question is to the hon. Minister of Transportation. Given that towing services often work in conjunction with law enforcement, ambulance, and fire crews, what safety measures are in place to ensure that they are protected from roadside incidents?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Drysdale: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the member for the question. She always works hard on behalf of her constituents. The safety of motorists and first responders and tow truck drivers is always a top priority for my department. Tow trucks have amber flashing lights to signal to other motorists that they are stopped and working on a vehicle at the roadside and work site. At scenes shared with emergency responders, tow truck operators also have additional protection from emergency vehicles.

The Speaker: First supplemental, hon. member.

Ms Fenske: Thank you. To the same minister: given that tow truck drivers work in these high-risk situations, does your ministry see value in allowing these personnel to have red and blue flashing lights so that they can be better identified on Alberta's highways?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Drysdale: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. No. Red and blue flashing lights identify emergency vehicles, and tow trucks are not considered emergency vehicles. It also should be noted that no other jurisdiction in Canada allows tow trucks to have red and blue flashing lights.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Fenske: Thank you. My final question is to the same minister. These tow truck operators are not feeling safe, so if red and blue lights are not an option for them, what alternative mechanisms or initiatives could your ministry support to ensure overall driver safety?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Drysdale: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's important for tow truck operators to take necessary steps to ensure that their work sites are safe. Part 12 of the occupational health and safety code outlines how signs, lights, barriers, traffic cones, et cetera, should be in place to assist in providing a safer environment for tow truck operators to work. As we continue building Alberta, safety on all work sites and on all provincial highways will be integral.

The Speaker: Thank you.

The hon. Member for Calgary-Fish Creek, followed by Dunvegan-Central Peace-Notley.

Continuity in Health Care

Mrs. Forsyth: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The story of Greg Price is tragic. It was told in vivid detail in December's Health Quality Council report. Greg died two years ago at the age of 31 of testicular cancer. It's tragic because the barriers that Greg faced while trying to access health care were well known by this government. The report notes six surveys over 10 years, each identifying the same fundamental problem, a systematic breakdown in communication. The breakdown prevented Greg from receiving timely care. To the minister, Greg's story is not unique, and it's not new. Why, after a decade of knowing . . .

Mr. Horne: Well, Mr. Speaker, I really want to thank the hon. member for the question. The story of that young gentleman is indeed very tragic. However, as the hon. member knows, the primary conclusion of the report was not only that there was a failure of communication but that there was a failure at several junctures in the course of Greg's care of physicians to communicate and share information regarding that patient. As a result of that report, we have begun work with the College of Physicians & Surgeons and other health professionals to determine what can be done to ensure that those breakdowns don't occur.

The Speaker: Supplemental, please.

Mrs. Forsyth: Thank you. Given that a priority in the 2010 five-year health action plan is now also a recommendation in the report following Greg's tragic death and given that the recommendation was to create an e-referral system connected to Netcare that would standardize the referral process, can the minister explain why Albertans are continuing to wait for this government to follow through on a four-year-old promise?

Mr. Horne: Well, Mr. Speaker, that was certainly one of the recommendations, and we are looking at the e-referral system in conjunction with Alberta Health Services. But the primary conclusion of the report is something that I think all of us can benefit from reflecting upon, and that is: first and foremost, physicians have responsibility and accountability for the care that they provide to patients. That includes, as the report demonstrates, communication that occurs when the patient is with the physician and when the patient is referred to another physician.

The Speaker: Hon. member, final sup.

Mrs. Forsyth: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. That leads into my next question. Given that the report spoke of doctors not being informed about patient care in emergency, not being informed about care their patients received from specialists, and not being informed about the patients' diagnostic tests or their results, how can Albertans needing health care today be assured that they won't fall through the same cracks as Greg did?

Mr. Horne: Mr. Speaker, first and foremost, what patients can rely on is the fact that this government and, I believe, physicians as a community in this province recognize that there is a great deal to be learned from this report. Again, the primary recommendations are around the accountability of physicians for the care that they provide to patients, both the care that they provide directly and the responsibility to share information when they make referrals to other physicians and, when they receive results of tests, to share those with other physicians as well. That is the learning from this very important report.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Dunvegan-Central Peace-Notley, followed by Calgary-Buffalo.

Smoky River Bridge Removal

Mr. Goudreau: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. A number of years ago an abandoned railway bridge in my constituency that crossed the Smoky River near Watino gave way during demolition, leaving a large part of this bridge in the river, where it poses a safety threat to navigation. It's been stated that the CNR was the owner of the bridge and, therefore, responsible for the cost of the removal of this bridge from the Smoky River, that the removal would take place by the end of last summer, and that compliance action would be taken if it became necessary. My first question is to the Minister of Environment and Sustainable Resource Development.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Environment and Sustainable Resource Development.

Mr. Campbell: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I want to say that I share the member's view about the importance of safety on our rivers and especially the Smoky River. We've been working with CN Rail and their contractor in getting the bridge removed from the river. I can tell you that the contractor tried to remove the bridge this summer and this fall but was unable to do so safely. I'm told that as soon as the spring runoff is done and the ice is gone, they'll try to remove the bridge again.

Mr. Goudreau: Mr. Speaker, to the same minister: will you consider taking a compliance action under the Water Act and/or the Environmental Protection and Enhancement Act to ensure that this work is done as soon as possible?

Mr. Campbell: Mr. Speaker, CN Rail and the contractor have been working in good faith. I will say to you that if this does change, we will look at enforcement action.

Mr. Goudreau: Mr. Speaker, to the same minister: can a deadline be imposed on CNR to ensure the removal of the bridge in a timely manner?

Mr. Campbell: Mr. Speaker, as I said, I do share the member's concern, but it's also important that when we do remove the bridge, we do so in a very safe manner. My department will continue to work with CN and the contractor, and we'll ensure that the bridge is removed from the Smoky River sooner rather than later. The company and contractor will try again this spring, as I said, to remove the bridge. It is my hope that they will be successful this time around.

2:40

Education Performance Measures

Mr. Hehr: Mr. Speaker, there's been a great deal of hyperbole and debate surrounding the merits of discovery math. I think that what is needed is a balance, and Alberta teachers know how to teach our students and implement a wide variety of individualized learning techniques. What needs to be remembered is that curriculum is one thing; teaching children is another. So whether we're talking about old math or new math, what is clear to me is that teachers need to be empowered. To the Minister of Education: regardless of what your curriculum states, how do you expect teachers to be able to support student learning with 25, 30, or even 40 kids in the classroom?

Mr. J. Johnson: Mr. Speaker, I think we've said repeatedly that, you know, we recognize that the size of the class is an important

factor in success, but it's not the only important factor, and it's not the most important factor. Certainly, we know that the younger grades benefit more greatly from investment in smaller class sizes, which is why that's one of the areas of the Education budget that's steadily been increased. So we do agree with the member that we want to invest in those areas, and we do invest in those areas, but it's not the only solution in terms of getting success for our students.

Mr. Hehr: Mr. Speaker, the numbers don't lie. Despite adding 48,000 more students from four years ago, only 106 new teachers have been hired. Keeping the same ratio to students from four years ago, we would have 3,200 more teachers in our classrooms. Instead, we have kids crammed in classrooms with fewer teachers per capita. Clearly, the minister must admit that this is not good for kids.

Mr. J. Johnson: Mr. Speaker, I'm not sure where the hon. member gets his stats from. I'd be quite happy to look at those and look into those more deeply, but the reality is that in Alberta we don't track how many teachers we have in the classrooms. It's probably something that we should do, and maybe that's one thing that will come back from the regulatory review committee; that is, requiring school boards to readily report, to more transparently report how many teachers they actually have doing instruction. Many teachers are involved, as you know, in administration; some are involved in research and other pieces. Those pieces of the budget are areas of the budget that were decreased, not the areas where we're investing in the classroom. We increased the budget in the classroom. We decreased the budgets in transportation and research.

Mr. Hehr: Well, those are some pretty big numbers, so we'll concentrate on some easy ones, the number 50. We know your government promised 50 new schools in the last election. To date you guys have not started building them. Will you just come clean with the Alberta public that none of these 50 new schools will be built by the next election?

Mr. McIver: Well, Mr. Speaker, it's always encouraging to see another member from the opposition excited about the building Alberta plan that we're putting in place under the Premier. Last week we heard a member anxious about having a shovel in their hand, and perhaps this hon. member wants a shovel in his hand as well.

As I have said in the past, Mr. Speaker, we have a plan. The first part of building a school, interestingly enough, isn't putting the shovel in the ground. It's putting the planning in place, deciding where it is, working with the school boards, getting the programming in place. We're doing that, and we intend to have those schools in place, 50 and 70, in 2016.

The Speaker: Thank you.

The time for question period has elapsed. Thank you, hon. members, for sticking to the 35-second rule, which was strictly enforced today, as a result of which 18 main questions were asked for a total of 108 questions and answers, a record. I did receive a couple of notes from a couple of members questioning the timing. I will check the log because we keep strict track of all this and just see if our timers were bang on or if they erred by a second or two. I don't think they did, but I will check it and let you know tomorrow.

In the meantime let's take a 30-second break, and then we'll move on.

Members' Statements

(continued)

The Speaker: Let us begin, then. The hon. Member for Strathmore-Brooks, followed by Grande Prairie-Smoky.

Bassano Continuing Care Centre

Mr. Hale: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to recognize the Newell Foundation for their hard work in developing a strategy to address the serious need for aging-in-care spaces and developing a comprehensive continuing care framework.

In 2010 it was identified that there were 975 individuals waiting for placement in the community. This project will ensure that the Bassano health centre and its service region, which is three times larger than the town, are properly cared for. The Bassano continuing care centre's intent is to integrate independent living, supportive living, long-term care, primary care, and acute care into a fully functional design that supports a variety of community amenities. The integration of these resources will enhance the financial and building design efficiencies. This model will set the stage as a best-practice demonstration project for future rural facilities.

For the less-intensive dedicated care areas such as resident rooms, health care could be overlaid in a home environment, with AHS providing health services where the resident lives within the facility as much as possible. The health staff would be funded and employed by AHS but have the ability to flex the location of care as needed and as appropriate within the facility. Designed around a crossgenerational model, the centre offers a complete continuum of care and wellness for both young and old.

With the land transfer from the town to the foundation now being finalized, the only step left before breaking ground is to sign a service contract with AHS. I trust the minister shares my gratitude of everyone involved and sees how local decision-making can provide the services communities need.

I'm hopeful that the minister will ensure that AHS makes this project a priority so that seniors across Alberta get the quality health care services they deserve.

The Speaker: Thank you.

The hon. Member for Grande Prairie-Smoky, followed by Calgary-Cross.

4-H Premier's Award Winner

Mr. McDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to again recognize the 2013 4-H Premier's award winner, Michelle Hoover. Ms Hoover was named the 2013 4-H Premier's award winner for her outstanding and commendable dedication to the organization. She was chosen from amongst the province's top members, who are helping to shape the future of rural Alberta through dedication to their communities. Ms Hoover is an eight-year member of the Delia 4-H Beef Club. She has held various executive positions in her club and district, participated enthusiastically in her beef project, and excelled in her public speaking.

Aside from her 4-H activities Ms Hoover takes giving back to her community to heart through her various volunteer activities. As the 4-H Premier's award recipient Ms Hoover has also been a role model over the past year for other 4-H members by attending events and speaking engagements across our province. 4-H members pledge their heads to clearer thinking, their hearts to greater loyalty, their hands to larger service, and their health to

better living for their club, their community, and their country, and Ms Hoover is a great example of these qualities and actions.

Mr. Speaker, 4-H has been a cornerstone in Alberta's agricultural history since its inception in 1917. While 4-H strengthens our ties to agriculture, it also teaches our youth important qualities that can be applied to all aspects of our lives, such as leadership, loyalty, and commitment. With the dedication and innovation exhibited by 4-H youth like Ms Hoover, I can say without a doubt that the future is looking very bright indeed.

Thank you.

The Speaker: Thank you.

The hon. Member for Calgary-Cross, followed by Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Greer Black

Mrs. Fritz: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm honoured today to pay tribute to an extraordinary Albertan. Greer Black has had a distinguished 35-year career in health care. He's been an outstanding president and chief executive officer for the Bethany Care Society for over 22 years, and he has been a long-time friend of mine. Greer recently announced that he will be retiring on March 28. He is a strong advocate for seniors and persons with disabilities. Greer ensured that they could live independently with grace and with dignity.

The Bethany Care Society, as you know, Mr. Speaker, is a faith-based, voluntary, not-for-profit organization dedicated to building relationships with the residents and clients they serve. Greer pioneered the way as his strong, steady hands created excellent programs in health, housing, and support services for over 6,500 Bethany clients. His clear vision and guidance created state-of-the-art continuing care facilities, affordable apartments, and community services. Many boards and organizations have benefited from Greer's wisdom and his expertise.

Greer was recently asked, Mr. Speaker, what his greatest success has been, and he stated:

I believe that our challenge has also been our success; I believe that creating a strong, distinctive culture within Bethany has been successful. Bethany's reputation within the province and within the communities we serve . . . has shown that the work done by many to create caring communities has worked. Our integration of spirituality is an integral part of resident care.

My heartfelt thanks and appreciation go to Greer for his strong legacy. He did make a difference in the lives of countless seniors and their families. I invite all members of this Assembly to join me in wishing Greer all the very best in his retirement.

The Speaker: Thank you.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods, followed by Calgary-*Buffalo*.

2:50

Provincial Fiscal Policies

Mr. Quadri: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today I rise to highlight a few of the many positive projects and funding announcements made in recent weeks. Alberta's population is rapidly expanding, and this growth would not be possible without a robust economy, high quality of life, and support for citizens who need it the most. Alberta is a great place to live and raise a family.

Mr. Speaker, our government has committed to projects which are integral in sustaining this growth while ensuring that our future generations have the tools necessary to sustain our success. Last week we announced \$600 million to continue the city of Edmonton's LRT project. Also last week we announced that we

will invest \$30 million into Grant MacEwan University through the building Alberta plan to achieve their dream of a single, sustainable downtown campus. Simply put, we are building now to ensure that our future is even brighter than today.

However, it is not only massive infrastructure projects and university campuses receiving the support and funding of this government. In a place of immense prosperity and success it's important to take care of the most vulnerable citizens as well. This government has increased the funding to at-risk children and youth, increased funding to persons with disabilities, and continues to invest in homeless support programs. Furthermore, over \$350 million has been budgeted for Alberta seniors benefits to ensure that those who have given us so much can be taken care of.

I'm very proud of this government, the work that they have done. We are not even done serving today, and we will make sure that we continue our prosperity and serve our future.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Thank you.

Craft Breweries

Mr. Hehr: As today is St. Patrick's Day and Albertans, as we know, are apt to imbibe on this day and occasionally on other days as well, I'd like to make a humble request. It's quite simple, really, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to see the government do more to support the development of a thriving and vibrant craft brewing and distillery industry in Alberta. According to Alberta Gaming and Liquor Commission 76 per cent of Albertans consume alcohol. Note to the government: that is a large constituency that it would do well to keep happy.

The new liquor manufacturing policies announced in early December were a good start after years of stagnation, but arguably much still needs to be done and can be done to bring us on par with the likes of other Canadian jurisdictions such as Ontario, British Columbia, and Nova Scotia. The province's focus for many years now has been on ensuring tremendous product choice in beer, wine, and spirits. However, far too often those products have come from other provinces and countries. There is a thirst out there, Mr. Speaker, for greater access to Alberta-made liquor products and craft beer in particular. We lag woefully behind other jurisdictions in this regard, which is incredibly ironic given this government's alleged support of Alberta entrepreneurs.

Well, Mr. Speaker, what we've actually been very good at is supporting the brewing and distillery industries in other provinces and the United States. Our small-brewer tax program, for example, continues to subsidize brewing jobs in the United States and elsewhere. This is a situation that urgently needs to be rectified, and it's one that the government promised to review.

We also need to revisit the volume limits placed on our mid-sized brewers. I'd really like to know what is happening on this front, as I'm sure is also the case for Alberta's small brewers. I'd also really like to encourage the government to continue looking at ways to liberalize the province's archaic liquor laws. I think allowing Alberta's small brewers and microdistillers to sell their wares at local . . .

The Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

Introduction of Bills

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Cypress-Medicine Hat.

Bill 204
Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy
(MLA Public Interest Fee Waiver)
Amendment Act, 2014

Mr. Barnes: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm honoured to rise to introduce for first reading Bill 204, Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy (MLA Public Interest Fee Waiver) Amendment Act, 2014.

Implementation of this bill will further the accessibility of public information for all Albertans through all 87 MLAs' ability to conduct four free freedom of information requests annually. These four FOIPs will be done with the Privacy Commissioner's oversight and approval. Annually it will be disclosed which MLAs did which freedom of information requests and at what costs. Essentially, it will be free for each MLA to do four freedom of information requests a year.

I was amazed to discover after being first elected that the costs and waiting times for reimbursement for doing our work were actually slowing us down. This was slowing us down from ensuring that Alberta citizens' and taxpayers' funds were being well spent. Can you imagine the lack of transparency and accountability that many Albertans, nonprofits, and organizations may be prevented from discovering because of their budget constraints?

This bill will encourage Albertans to work with any MLA to increase government accountability and transparency. Mr. Speaker, I look forward to the debate on this bill.

The Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

[Motion carried; Bill 204 read a first time]

Tabling Returns and Reports

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Little Bow, followed by Strathmore-Brooks.

Mr. Donovan: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have a tabling here of the five requisite copies of a resolution from the AAMD and C for the local bridge program to come back. It's costing municipalities over \$50 million a year. That's what they're short right now. There's a \$22 million shortfall for that. I'll table these.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Strathmore-Brooks, followed by Edmonton-Centre.

Mr. Hale: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have the required number of copies for this tabling. It's with regard to the Bassano continuing care centre. It's the October 11, 2013, final report. It's what my member's statement today was about, and I would like to present them.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. I wish I didn't read so much. I'd like to table the appropriate number of copies of two documents that I referenced during a question last week on legal aid. The first is produced by the Canadian Bar Association. It's called Reaching Equal Justice Report: An Invitation to Envision and Act, Equal Justice: Balancing the Scales. That's the first one.

The second one is also published by the Canadian Bar Association, and it's called Moving Forward on Legal Aid:

Research on Needs and Innovative Approaches. This one was prepared on June 2010. I missed the date on the other one.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Thank you.

Tablings to the Clerk

The Clerk: I wish to advise the House that the following documents were deposited with the office of the Clerk: on behalf of the hon. Mr. Hughes, Minister of Municipal Affairs, pursuant to the Safety Codes Act the Safety Codes Council annual report 2012; pursuant to the Government Organization Act the 2011-2012 authorized accredited agency summary, the 2012-13 Alberta Elevating Devices and Amusement Rides Safety Association annual report, the Alberta Boilers Safety Association annual report 2013.

On behalf of the hon. Mr. Horner, President of Treasury Board and Minister of Finance, pursuant to the Insurance Act the Automobile Insurance Rate Board 2013 annual report for the year ended December 31, 2013.

The Speaker: Thank you, hon. members.

We had no points of order today, I'm happy to report, so we can move on.

Orders of the Day

Public Bills and Orders Other than
Government Bills and Orders
Second Reading

Bill 202
Independent Budget Officer Act

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Fish Creek.

Mrs. Forsyth: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This province is a wonderful place to live and raise a family. It's the economic engine of Canada, with low unemployment and low taxes, but for all the province's wealth, with the government's budgets we're often left scratching our heads. The budgets used to be straightforward, so anyone could understand how the tax dollars were used. Now that's just not the case.

When I entered public office, we had a Premier who walked the walk on accountability, openness, and transparency. His name was Ralph Klein. Under his leadership Alberta balanced its budgets and did so with comprehensive budgets that everyone could understand. Not even the Auditor General can understand our province's budget, and this, quite frankly, needs to change.

3:00

Under Ralph's leadership we had the Deficit Elimination Act. We also added some of our surpluses to the sustainability fund. Now we don't have the Deficit Elimination Act, and the sustainability fund has been drained. This is not what the Premier told us when she ran to be the leader of her party or this province. Then she used to say: "Debt is the trap that has caught so many struggling governments. Debt has proven the death of countless dreams." Now she says that debt is hope. Quite frankly, what are Albertans to think?

To remedy this situation, I've put forward the Independent Budget Officer Act. This act will create a provincial budget officer that will be an independent officer of the Legislature. The office would provide independent analysis of the government revenues and expenditures. It would not be like the Auditor General, which

examines how money is spent. It would not do policies, programs, or decisions made – this would still be the role of the Legislature – but the PBO would be a source of unbiased information about the government's revenues and expenditures.

A provincial budget officer is necessary because the government's budgets and its assumptions are at times questionable. The key numbers have been politicized. Going into the last election, the Premier tabled what many called the Cinderella budget. The picture painted was so rosy that it must have been a fairy tale. By the time the next budget was tabled, we had moved from a fairy tale, quite frankly, to a nightmare.

Then there was a term no one had ever heard: the bitumen bubble. I say that no one had ever heard of it because we asked Finance and Treasury Board through FOIP about the term. They had no record of it, but I'll bet that if you FOIPed the Premier's office or the Public Affairs Bureau, you'd find all sorts of records. They probably focus tested that, too.

Albertans deserve better than this situation, Mr. Speaker. They deserve real accountability, and they deserve transparency. We've seen this government take some positive steps on expenses as well as salary disclosures. The government likes to talk about all the gold standards it has set, but to me it seems more like fool's gold. The expense gambles haven't stopped. They've continued, and they're getting worse. More troubling is that it always seems to start at the top.

The government loves travelling in first class and billing taxpayers for fancy hotels, but they're shocked when it's pointed out to them. They say that they'll look into it or that they didn't know about it or "How could that happen?" or that it's the staff's fault or that the policy is unclear. This government created the policies less than two years ago. It's their fault. They're out of touch with responsible spending, and they only look into their bad behaviour when the opposition points it out.

This is not a new idea, Mr. Speaker. Ontario is setting up a PBO. The government of Canada has one. Every state in the United States has one, too. It would be simple to set up. The staff that currently works at Finance and Treasury Board would run the PBO. It would be a source of statistics, indicators, and forecasts that the government would use as well as the public. It would be a public asset, not a political asset.

I can tell you right now that our colleges and universities wish for trustworthy budgets. Imagine how professors and students feel after the last few budgets. They believed that the 2012 budget would show that everything was rosy. Nothing to worry about then. Then Budget 2013 was tabled, and now they really have to worry. A planned increase turned into a forced cut. They had the rug pulled out from under them. They had no time to plan for the budgets that they were being handed. Many were laid off. Programs were cut. That was the same situation for those in the PDD programs. Cuts were made that totally blindsided everyone. Vulnerable people in our province deserve better. The great people who run our vital programs need predictability. They deserve better.

Another part of my bill would allow any MLA or committee to request an independent cost analysis of program spending. A major issue my constituents have struggled with is the government's promise to renovate and build new schools. It appears they've made a promise that they just can't keep with respect to 70 modernizations and 50 new schools. This government has stubbornly insisted that it can build every one they promised even though builders aren't bidding on the P3s to make them.

What the government has been great at is building signs. We can trust that as soon as someone had an idea for a building, the sign would be built for thousands of dollars. What we can't trust is

the government's ability to follow through. Their numbers can't be trusted. Their budgets can't be trusted.

To avoid further politicization of the budget numbers, my bill would not allow past MLAs to hold a provincial budget office. We've seen too many government offices become politicized, independent or not. If you want to be seen as impartial and beyond reproach, you have to step back from political life. Judges know this. So do other people in the public sector. But the government doesn't seem to care. It seems like they're against it. They want people they can trust, not the public. The word "independent" means free from outside control, but with the government, that is not what they want. They like control. They appoint boards like AHS, but when they don't do what they want, they fire them. They don't like independence; they like dependence. They need to change. We need officers of this Legislature, that are free from government control, to do what's best for Albertans. I think an independent provincial budget officer is exactly what Albertans want and what Albertans need.

Mr. Speaker, at a time when Albertans are asking their elected members to act first and foremost on their behalf, not on behalf of the government or the governing party but to have the wishes of their constituents in mind, this bill provides a great opportunity for that. An independent budget officer would allow members to better represent those who elect them. They would be able to provide their constituents with timely, accurate, and factual information about the state of the province's finances, information free from spin and free from partisan language.

Albertans don't want talking points. They want to know the truth. I'm going to encourage every member of the Assembly to reflect on what they hear today and to support this bill.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. President of Treasury Board, followed by Edmonton-Centre.

Mr. Horner: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. You know, the hon. member is bringing forward something that on the surface sounds like something that everyone should jump behind.

I want to read something, Mr. Speaker.

As an independent legislative... office, our work [would assist] the Legislative Assembly, and in particular... Public Accounts [and MLAs], in holding the government accountable... provide opinions on whether the consolidated financial statements of the province, and the financial statements of every ministry, department, fund and provincial agency, are presented appropriately.

That sounds pretty good.

They would audit the financial statements and the performance measures to ensure that the performance measures are actually dealing with what we said we would be doing in terms of the objectives and that those performance measures in that audit would actually lead to recommendations to the government that are public and reportable back to this House. Mr. Speaker, these recommendations would be "to improve performance reports and the processes the government follows to produce them." An important part of that mandate should be "to examine and report on the government's management control systems."

Many of the concerns the hon. member has just raised based on the concerns that she has, amongst a whole raft of others, Mr. Speaker, this proposed office would not deal with because they're political and they're ideological from the opposition's perspective. And rightly so. They should have that opportunity. They should have the opportunity to tear the budget apart and report back to the constituents on what they like, what they don't like, what they think is right, what they think is wrong, and we encourage them to

do that. We're about to go through a very onerous and long process. Every department is going to go through that. In fact, tonight we're going to have three hours on one department alone where the opposition is going to be able to do that.

Mr. Speaker, the hon. member says that no one understands the budget that we presented, yet I've been across the province talking to chambers, rotary clubs, individuals. I'll be talking to councillors and municipalities tomorrow. Nobody has said to me that they don't understand the budget except the opposition and one other group that is looking for subscriptions and headlines.

Mr. Speaker, I digress a little bit because what I was talking about was a mandate. The hon. member was talking about the mandate of the office. What I just read to you sounds awfully similar to the mandate that is in the proposed budget office, too. The mandate I just read you is actually the Auditor General's mandate. Why would we create an office that does the same thing that the Auditor General's office is mandated to do? The Auditor General is not political. He provides unbiased opportunities for them to take shots at if they wish. He does the recommendations. In fact, he does a lot of recommendations every year.

In fact, we also have an audit committee made up of individuals from the private sector who look over the reports that the Auditor General does and the reports that the government does. That audit committee also has mandates that are similar to what the hon. member talks about with the independent budget officer. Frankly, some of what's in this independent budget office are things that opposition MLAs should be doing as part of their job, but I wouldn't go down that road.

3:10

Mr. Speaker, the other piece is that it's unclear the extent of what the budget offices in other jurisdictions do. I mean, we've done a little bit of work on this because one of the chambers of commerce in the province actually recommended we do this, the Calgary Chamber of Commerce. I've had a lot of discussions with the Calgary Chamber of Commerce about what the opportunity might be to look at other ways that we can have vetting, if you will, of the forecast. The hon. member talks about the forecast in her question. I readily agree. In fact, I seem to recall that during my Budget Address in this House I made the comment that the day that we put the forecast, that we had to print, it was probably going to be wrong, and everybody across the House was going to be critical of it. It is amazing that that prediction has come true. That forecast was entirely accurate.

What is difficult, Mr. Speaker, and what no independent budget officer would be able to do either is to predict what the Canadian dollar is going to be three months from now, to predict what oil is going to be six months from now. The hon. member talks about the bitumen bubble. In fact, the press came up with the bitumen bubble. The industry is the one that told us the differential was going to rise based on a glut of production heading into the Bakken that had nowhere to go.

Mr. Speaker, forecasting is a very complicated situation in our province. It's not the same as in other provinces, although this year we did actually do something that B.C. does. They brought in a group of independent forecasters and economists. They do this on a regular basis. They bring them in every year, and they provide the Minister of Finance with recommendations. They also look at the assumptions that are going to be put into the budget and give an indication as to whether or not they think they're in line with where their forecasts are. We had two forecasting summits last year. We brought experts from across Canada, even North America, to talk about forecasting. Those are the forecasts that are in this budget.

I have in my hands, actually, the Alberta Chambers of Commerce budget presentations. I heard the hon. member on some of the media this morning talking about: well, if the chambers of commerce support the budget, which they do, and the chambers of commerce support the format of the budget, which they do, and the chambers of commerce support the fact that the calculation of our consolidated surplus is \$1.1 billion, similar to what the federal government does their calculation on and the same way that Premier Klein used to calculate the surplus deficit number – they all agree with this. [interjection] In fact, it is true, hon. member. [interjection] Mr. Speaker, the hon. member is trying to change the rules of accounting, which is rather interesting given that he's the critic.

In fact, Mr. Speaker, the Auditor General has not given us an unqualified statement. He's actually said that our financial statements do reflect the true picture of Alberta's finances. It's different, I might say, than what is happening in Saskatchewan, as an example.

Anyway, I have in my hands – and I think that these have been tabled in the House previously; if not, I will get the requisite number of copies at the appropriate opportunity – from the Alberta Chambers of Commerce their submissions to me both from last year and this year in terms of the budget recommendations. If you were to review through here, you would actually find that there is a lot of support for how we're doing the savings plan, operating plan, capital plan. There's a lot of support for what we're doing in terms of how we're going to build capital. There are a lot of very good suggestions, some of which were included in Budget 2013, some of which were included, actually, in Budget 2014. Nowhere in these two documents, Mr. Speaker, does the Alberta Chambers of Commerce call for an independent budget officer.

The Calgary Chamber of Commerce did talk about the creation of a provincial budget office, and I'm actually talking to them about the why. Why are they looking for this? We were having some very good discussions about what they perceived to be a change in how we were doing our accounting and what is the actual fact. It's unfortunate that other forces, if you will, are trying to cloud the issue of what is the public-sector accounting for its principles because they have not changed. The public-sector accounting principles which this province, this government, follows are the same as the principles that are followed in British Columbia. They're the same as the principles that are followed by the federal government. They haven't changed.

Mr. Speaker, what I see here is a political attempt to try to do something to, I guess, add to their political – you know, they talk about how this would be unbiased, but in actual fact the whole reason they're bringing it in is for political gain. This is a duplication of what is an officer of this Legislature already. This would be an added expense. This would be an added process in terms of cost for the taxpayers of Alberta. The government is the one that presents the budget, not an independent person that's been appointed. The government is the one that decides on the priorities of where we're going to be putting our expenditures and where we're going to be investing for the future of Albertans.

I'm just not exactly sure to what extent an independent budget officer would benefit taxpayers or the budget process, Mr. Speaker, because many of the concerns they've raised, they've raised in this House before. They talk about, you know, the fact that we have made a conscious choice to use the capital markets to build the infrastructure that Albertans need today and into the future. We have not made the choice that the opposition leader has made, which is to defer capital and not build that capital, which is not what Albertans told us to do. They told us to build it today.

Yes, Mr. Speaker, we have been very clear that we made the conscious choice to utilize our 50-year lows in interest rates and amortize that over the life of the assets. Frankly, the chambers of commerce agree with that. The financial administrators and planners in this province agree with that. Anyone who has done any type of economics or financial planning or ran a business agrees that you use all the levers at hand to accomplish the tasks you need. Right now, with 105,000 people moving into our province last year, we need infrastructure, and every municipality will agree to that. In fact, every municipality is also doing what we're doing.

Thank you. I will not support this bill.

The Speaker: Thank you.

I have Edmonton-Centre, then, presumably, a government member, and then Edmonton-Calder or Edmonton-Strathcona.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Well, Mr. Provincial Treasurer, *tsk, tsk, tsk*. Now who's getting political on whose time?

I've had the great honour, Mr. Speaker, of being here for 18 budget presentations and 19 Public Accounts years. As the Provincial Treasurer well knows, an Auditor General examines past accounts, and a budget officer looks at forward accounts, at the budget, which comes at the front end of the planning process. I'm sure he knows that – I hope he knows that – because he is the Treasurer. There; I just solved that one for you. It was pretty simple.

But what I notice in the budgets that have been presented – and I've mentioned this a number of times during debates on supplementary supplies and interim supplies and budget debates, and I've had a number of hon. colleagues opposite agree with me. The budgets that this government puts forward are harder and harder and harder to understand, to know where the money is coming from and where it's going. The whole transparency is about as clear as a black plastic bag, being able to see what the government intends and how things are going to proceed.

Let me give you just a few examples of that. We end up with the government announcing the same project over and over and over and over again. You think: "I'm pretty sure I heard that. That school was announced or that – oh, wait – children's mental health program. Three of those I've heard announced, at least three." Then you're thinking: "Well, let me go look at the budget. Were there three of them in there or only one of them in there?" That's very hard to tell.

I used to look at budgets that had votes and under that subvotes and under that program votes, so you could actually tell what the programs were that the government was running. You would have vote 11, and it would say: environmental monitoring. Then under that you'd have 11.1, and it would give you more of a breakdown on how we were monitoring the environment, let's say by, you know, soil or air, land, and water. Under each of those there would be a further breakdown that would tell you what programs they were actually running. No, no, no. Not that anymore. We get one vote.

3:20

I mean, just think of it. How transparent is it to have one vote for Alberta Health Services under the Health budget? One vote. Is it \$19 billion now? I think so. One vote. No subvotes, no program descriptions, but we're supposed to glean out of this one number how transparent and accountable this government is. Really? How can we possibly hold the government and make them be accountable when this whole budgeting process has become such

a process of digging out and pulling the threads to see what the government is actually planning to do in a budget? There was so little information given.

The other example I'll give you just very quickly is the old: well, we'll tell you three years in advance. That's the newest one. So we get: "Oh, we're going to give a hundred and fifty million more dollars to the municipalities. Aren't we wonderful?" Well, hmm, over a three-year time period it's actually \$50 million a year, and that's not quite so impressive. They roll it together so they can talk about things with a much larger number, and it looks much more impressive. You know, that would even be a good thing if they would follow through with it.

But by the time you get into year 1 and a half of their three-year rollout, they've stopped talking about that program. It's disappeared, and the next time you see a budget, the performance measurement is gone. The indicator is gone. Nobody talks about that anymore. It just disappeared. Where's the accountability in that, Mr. Speaker? They roll all this money out. They promise it to these people. Big, impressive numbers: gone. How transparent and accountable is it to say: "We believe in cities and municipalities, the MSI money, absolutely. We're going to follow through on all our promises"? That is just a falsehood.

They say, "We were going to give \$1.6 billion over a three-year plan." They didn't even get close to that. Right from the get-go they ran a three-year program, and they never even got close to giving out that amount of money. Where are we, actually? Well, we're not doing \$1.6 billion. We're not doing \$1.2 billion. Oh, wait a minute. We're doing \$900 million, which is a lot of money, Mr. Speaker. I'm not debating that. We're a wealthy province, and we do pretty well. But, really, it's \$900 million. Don't try to put a party dress on that and throw some sparkles in your hair and go running out there pretending that it's \$1.2 billion because it's not.

Now, if you want to add a little purse to your party outfit, and the purse is worth about 300 and some-odd million dollars, you could say that the whole outfit was \$1.2 billion. Nice, huh? That's exactly what they've done. They're still paying \$900 million into MSI, and then they have a little purse that's called – I can't even remember what it is now – transit money or something that they've tucked in there as their little sparkly purse, you know, a little clutch, one that you take. Then they can say that it's an outfit worth \$1.2 billion. No, it isn't. We still haven't gotten anywhere close to the promise back from 2007 that there was going to be \$1.6 billion. Less and less information, less and less transparency, less and less accountability.

Now, the minister talks about that somehow what the Official Opposition has recommended is political and partisan. Oh, Mr. Speaker. Well, coming from this government, it's a little hard to choke down, friends. I've watched this government for a long period of time. I know how political you are, and I know how much you cover those areas of your body that you sit on frequently. I know how political you can be.

You know, by way of an example, the budget is supposed to be passed by the first of April. How many times has the budget been passed by the time we get into the fiscal year? Anybody? Anybody? Pop quiz. I think they've done it once in the time I've been here. Once. What kind of managerial skill and oversight and transparency and accountability does it take for a government to not get its budget done let's call it 17 out of 18 times? Like, wow. That's a pretty bad fail rate. You wouldn't pass that performance measurement.

And wait. We're not even talking about the need to pass the interim supply, which used to be called the special warrant. In order to give yourself money to continue operating, you always like to slide that one through. Wait, there's more. There's more, as

they say on the television commercial. For the same \$24.99 you are going to get one to two supplementary supply budgets a year. Now, sometimes supplementary supply budgets, in fact, are needed. There have been forest fires. There have been floods. There's actually a need to spend additional money. But let's talk politics, let's talk partisanship because that would be about when they say, "Oh, um, we just budgeted kind of low on the forest fires," which happen every year, then "Oops." They've got to put more money in there when it rolls around. Well, what do you think that's about? That's about delivering a budget to people where they go: "Look at how wonderful we are. We've got a surplus, and we're spending less than we're bringing in, blah, blah, blah." Not true, Mr. Speaker, because they haven't budgeted for a number of things they know will cost more. They deliberately lowball it and then bring it back in.

Are you checking to see whether "blah, blah, blah" is parliamentary, Mr. Speaker? I'm pretty sure it is, but do call me on it if I'm wrong.

We spend less time debating our budgets now. We no longer debate in the Assembly, where there's lots of room for people to come and listen. We're going to stuff everybody into a very small committee room, where they can't hear very well and there isn't enough room for the media and the guests. So do I think this is a good idea?

Oh, I'm sorry. There's one other thing the Provincial Treasurer said. I'm curious about why the Provincial Treasurer thinks that the budget officer would not be able to consult the same – and possibly different, maybe even more – experts for an opinion on the oil crisis in the budget. Surely, this would be an intelligent person. They can easily go and make the same kind of consultation and predictions on the price of oil as the government can. Maybe they'd be more accurate even. That's another political partisan trick this government has played on us for a very, very long time, to lowball the revenue and highball the expenses. Gosh darn, don't they end up with an awesome surplus?

So, Mr. Speaker, all in all, do I think a budget officer is a good idea? Yes, I do. I think it would be very helpful to us here in Alberta because the government has made such a job, such a mandate for itself to cover and obfuscate and disguise and put black plastic bags over things. I think it would be very helpful to put a little sunshine in there.

Thank you.

The Speaker: Thank you.

Hon. member, I was just asked by some members if 29(2)(a) was available, and I was just checking the record for that, not about anything that you might have asked about. Standing Order 29(2)(a) is not available for private members' bills, as most of us know, so that stands clarified.

Let us move on now. Is there anyone from the side here?

If not, then let's go over to Edmonton-Strathcona or Edmonton-Calder, whichever one of you. You have a spot here. Edmonton-Strathcona, please proceed.

Ms Notley: Oh, okay. Then we're right there already.

Well, this is an interesting piece of legislation that, generally speaking, we are in support of, in that there is a desperate need in this Legislature for some clarity and transparency with respect to how the financial information in this province is reported to Albertans and also to members of this Assembly. From that perspective it's long overdue. It's long overdue because it exists in most other jurisdictions, it's long overdue because it exists federally, it's long overdue because it exists in many other provinces, and it's long overdue because this particular govern-

ment has a well-documented history of, you know, overestimating revenue when it's politically convenient, underestimating revenue when it's politically convenient. Depending on whatever their particular political agenda is of the day, the expectation with respect to revenue is massaged, shall we say, to support whatever political objective it is that they are pursuing.

Ms Blakeman: Pummelled, maybe.

Ms Notley: Pummelled. The Member for Edmonton-Centre says that the actual numbers are pummelled, that I'm being too polite – me, of all people – to the government when I say that they're being massaged. But in any event, there's no question that those numbers warrant some well-informed, independent, third-party oversight, to which all members of this Assembly would have equal access. I know that's kind of a revolutionary thought, but, you know, it is true.

When we go into the budget lock-up, one of the things that I find very interesting is that we have that brief window of time where we get access to the finance officials who this government have endless access to and to which we have almost no access. For those 45 minutes when they're allowed into that room for us, we're able to sort of pepper them with questions, and it's like Christmas Day for some of us who are actually sort of interested in finding out what's going on in this government.

3:30

You know, they're quite good about answering questions. They try to be as straightforward and as transparent as possible. It's amazing. You'll have them tell you something, and it'll take you three weeks to extract it out of a minister in some other forum. It would be so lovely if we had that 45-minute Christmas morning opportunity, for those of us interested in genuine transparency in this province, actually as a matter of right in this House. [interjection] I'm talking about budget lock-up. That is why it would be so fabulous to have that extended to all members of this House.

Now, we definitely support better access to information for Albertans to understand the choices that their government is making and to be able to come to their own conclusions through a very clear and transparent and unspun analysis or, if it's going to be spun, that at least it's spun by everyone on both sides so Albertans get the opportunity to pick their spinner as opposed to being subject to only that which the government would like them to be aware of.

You know, a financial accountability officer would also get a more fulsome picture of the financial impacts of bills or proposals because the legislation would include a consideration of financial benefits as well as costs. I think that this is a very, very good idea.

The only qualification that I would give to that, with the greatest of respect to my colleagues over there in the Official Opposition and the even greater level of respect to my colleagues over there who are currently in government, is that I actually think that this bill was kind of drafted by a government-in-waiting, so it doesn't quite go as far as I think it could to ensure true guarantees of accountability. You know, it's a bill that allows for pretty much the whole purpose of the bill to be undermined through regulation after the fact. As members from the caucus who put this bill forward know, that's something that, generally speaking, we don't want to include in legislation because it means that we're just laying the groundwork to play the same games that the government is, and why would we want to play the same games as the government?

What we want to do is ensure that the bill itself sets the standards very clearly for everyone to understand and that it does not allocate authority to whomever the governing party is to undercut it in the future. That is one of the things that we're a little bit worried about with respect to this bill. Again, the intentions are excellent, and we support them a hundred and fifty per cent, but what we would like to do is really limit the authority that this current bill would delegate to the Lieutenant Governor in Council. We would like to limit the extent of that so that we have a clear understanding.

We also want to make sure that the mandate of the independent budget officer is more clearly delineated. Do we want another partisan patronage appointee following his or her marching orders from the government of the day, or do we want a budget officer with some teeth to provide us with transparent information and allow all Albertans to hold their government accountable? I would suggest that it is the latter that we are seeking. Currently, as the bill is drafted, I don't think that we can be totally sure we've got that clarity. I think that we need to look at giving more definition to the mandate of the independent budgetary officer.

In Ontario, for instance, the Ontario financial accountability officer not only may undertake to estimate the financial costs of bills or proposals; he or she may also undertake research into those costs. So it's a broader mandate which doesn't limit the officer to just adding and subtracting to provide an accounting cost to the public. Instead, the budget officer should be able to undertake whatever research is necessary to get a full analysis of the proposal that's put before him.

We would expand the IBO's mandate, beyond that which is included in this particular bill, to give the officer all of the powers that are necessary to provide a fully complete picture of the financial costs and benefits of any particular government action to the public.

We would also recommend that the independent budgetary officer be given the ability to undertake an analysis on his or her own initiative, and this is important to ensure that nonroutine analysis can be carried out on issues that are important to the province. Otherwise, we end up relying on the Legislative Assembly or a committee to request an analysis from the IBO, which allows political choices to dictate what will and will not be reviewed by the IBO. Again, I think we need to not do that. I think we need to give this independent officer the breadth of authority that he or she needs to really provide that important public service to all Albertans, transparency. So we want to make sure that we're not controlling the independent budget officer.

We should also ensure that there is meaningful input by all parties, regardless of size, in the appointment of the independent budget officer. I'm pretty sure that we would see that happening by way of an all-party committee, but I need to be sure that that's what the legislation prescribes. I think it does, but I'm just going to double-check on that. We want to have an all-party panel so that every party has an equal voice, and frankly I would suggest that we have an all-party panel where it is possible for the opposition to have the majority of the votes. Quite frankly, right now the government gets access to all this information anyway, so this is really about ensuring that this information is shared with all Albertans.

We want to also ensure that we provide in the legislation the necessary protections for the independent budget officer to carry out his or her duties without interference or pressure from the Assembly. In Ontario, for instance, the legislation specifically stipulates that the financial accountability officer shall not do any work that interferes with his or her duties to that office. [Ms Notley's speaking time expired] Already? For goodness' sake.

The Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

Anyone else who wishes to participate? Let us go to Airdrie, and then I have Innisfail-Sylvan Lake, followed by Calgary-Shaw unless I have others that wish to intervene.

Mr. Anderson: Thank you. I'm happy to rise today in support of this Bill 202, the Independent Budget Officer Act. I would preface my comments. You know, often in this Legislature we've heard the Finance minister talk about giving Albertans a choice between building and going into debt and not going into debt and building nothing. Those are the two options that he gives them. I think, Mr. Speaker and hon. minister, that a competent government could do both, could build and balance, could build what we need, could build the infrastructure that we need within the confines of the \$44 billion that we're bringing in. I think that's a reasonable request from the people of Alberta. We can do both.

Does that mean that we can build everything we want in the first year or two? No, but we can sure build a heck of a lot with a \$44 billion budget. But we have to be practical. We have to be smart about it. We can balance, and we can build. It is possible. A competent government would be able to do that.

I'm thankful for the comments by Edmonton-Centre on the difference between the independent budget officer and the Auditor General. Of course, the Auditor General looks back; the independent budget officer would look more forward. Hopefully, that's now understood by the Finance minister.

I would also point out that, actually, the Finance minister is wrong when he says that the way they did the budgeting for the deficit and so forth is the same as what they did back in Premier Klein's days. Obviously, I wasn't there during Premier Klein's days, but I was there, of course, during Premier Stelmach's days, in the first year there. They used to actually include in the deficit number all grants for school boards, hospital boards, regional health authorities, and so forth, and that was actually included in their consolidated budget number. Now, actually, they've moved those grants out of what they count as the deficit.

3:40

Mr. Horner: No, we haven't.

Mr. Anderson: Yes. Yes, you have. I can go over the numbers. You have, Minister. It actually does dilute further the budget number. In fact, they made that change just in the last year as part of their moving SUCH-sector assets onto the books, and you should know that, Minister.

Anyway, I'm going to go over some of the pros – and there are many – of this act, of this bill. First off, I believe that this is a great idea because it would be an independent check on government. It would place an independent check on government in their predictions of revenue and expenditures, which would prevent government from essentially fudging the budget numbers.

We saw this, of course, prior to the last election, with the well-known Alice-in-Wonderland budget, as it was often called. The problem with that budget was that there were extremely unreasonable revenues that were projected by this government prior to the election so that they could promise billions and billions in new spending, and of course it was just pie in the sky. Now, everyone knew that, and I'm pretty sure the Premier and the Finance minister knew it, too, but they still went forward with those numbers, and they did so purely for political purposes. Having an independent budget officer would stop this practice so that when we go into a budget, we can actually have a reasonable understanding and confidence in what the budget numbers, in fact,

are for revenue and expenditures, specifically for revenue in that example.

Under this, the proposed bill, any MLA or committee would have the ability to request an independent cost estimate of a project. A classic example: the Minister of Infrastructure or of Transportation – I forget which; they switched. Anyway, the Member for Grande Prairie-Wapiti said, in answer to a question, that the southwest leg of the ring road will cost anywhere between 1 and a half billion dollars and \$10 billion. We saw an estimate from the Minister of Infrastructure today saying that it would be more in the \$5 billion range. Actually, I think it was from the Finance minister, that it would be more in the \$5 billion range.

There's obviously a huge amount – between \$1 billion and \$10 billion is a lot. It would be nice to have an independent budget officer to kind of put a number value on these big projects and these big initiatives of government so that all the members of the House can debate using a common set of facts instead of the government saying, "Oh, it's going to cost this much; the south-side hospital is going to cost \$500 million" when, in fact, no, it didn't cost \$500 million. It cost 1 and a half billion dollars and rising. And there are many other examples of that. Or the MLA offices across the way in the federal building, which is now up to almost \$400 million when it started as about a \$250 million project.

Having that independent officer would help us know these things before the money is spent so that we can debate whether it's proper, whether it's good government, good governance to go ahead with such projects or initiatives. The independence of the office would ensure that Albertans are receiving fair and politically unaltered information regarding the expected financial position of the province. Of course, that goes back to the budgeting and the three different budgeting documents that the government puts out for operational, capital, and saving and how we've had much confusion from the majority of commentators and folks looking at the budget. I've received thousands of letters, e-mails, et cetera, on this issue. Many have CCed the Finance minister, so I know that he's getting a lot of them. People are confused about what the real numbers are, and this would help with that.

Groups like the Chambers of Commerce, of course, would recognize the importance of this, and I think that that's something, certainly, to be noted. All 50 states, Canada's federal government, and an increasing number of provinces have an independent budget officer to ensure this type of transparency and accountability. This is not a new endeavour. It makes sense. It's pretty standard across North America and in the Westminster system.

The cost for establishing the office would be negligible as we would have the staff and expertise essentially move over from the Finance department. This is key. We're not talking about adding new bureaucracy. We're talking about taking what the Finance ministry already does, taking those resources, plopping them into an independent office so that they could do their job independent of any political influence from the Finance minister.

Of course, this demonstrates our commitment in the Wildrose to accountability, since we fully expect this officer to be holding us to account as government, and we very much look forward to having that. I think it's a good tool for government to help us to control our costs, to help us make decisions based on proper input, and to make sure the entire caucus knows what those costs will be so that they can in caucus and in the Legislature make their voices heard and have the facts at their disposal so that they can use those facts to argue for or against certain government initiatives, programs, and building projects, et cetera.

It can also be very difficult for opposition parties and third-party groups to hold government accountable when we don't have access to adequate information. It is truly hard. It's hard to make budget presentations, alternative budgets, and so forth when we don't know what some of these things will cost. Obviously, we don't have the Department of Infrastructure or the Department of Finance to come up with these projections and to come up with these things. This would improve democracy by making sure all opposition parties have access to the proper information to give constructive criticism.

Wildrose, of course, truly wants to change the way government does business, making it more transparent, accountable, and acting on behalf of Albertans, not the government party. To preserve independence, this bill makes it so that no MLA or former MLA can be appointed budget officer. I think that's a good idea. Also, the officer can only be reappointed to one five-year term. In other words, there's a two-term limit. The independent budget officer could be mandated to produce true consolidated budget forecasts that include a consolidated cash-in, cash-out deficit number, and it would prevent the government from playing its current fiscal shell game.

It would prevent the provincial government from politicizing economic indicators like energy prices and the so-called bitumen bubble. The IBO would be the authority on these indicators, so politicians could not over- or underestimate revenues for political gains. It would also be an extra check on government, as we've talked about, for project expenditure estimates and would provide an independent analysis of what government projects are feasible under certain parameters.

The IBO would also be at the disposal of the Legislative committees to aid them in their work when they are needed in assessing different initiatives that they are undertaking to study and so forth. Where the mandate of the Auditor General only allows for after-the-fact analysis of where the money has been poorly spent and how not to repeat poor spending, the work of the IBO could prevent poor spending. An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. Did I get that right?

Mr. Wilson: You did.

Mr. Anderson: All right. There you go.

Mr. Speaker, in closing, I'd like to congratulate the Member for Calgary-Fish Creek. No one in this Legislature has seen more bills, more private members' bills, passed in the history of this Legislature than this member. I hope very much that this will just be another notch in her very successful belt.

Thank you.

The Speaker: Thank you.

Anyone else here?

Then we'll go to the leader of the Liberal opposition, and then we'll go to Innisfail-Sylvan Lake unless there's someone from the fourth party.

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to support this bill without amendments. The Alberta Liberals seek to build a strong economy and a strong society premised on the facts of fiscal prudence, social and environmental responsibility. If you look at Alberta's current economic situation, this is as good as it gets. We have amongst the highest employment rates on the planet. Our population has grown. We're getting younger. Our incomes are high. The price of oil and gas is quite high. Yet the current Conservative government is taking our province into debt and cutting back the very programs that help build a strong society and a better economy.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre did a wonderful job of schooling the Finance minister. Not only did she undress him, but she just re-dressed him with a nice purse with some trinkets in it. That's exactly what the government does with the current budgeting process. They change the definition of budgeting. On one hand, they're going into debt; on the other hand, they have a surplus; on the other hand, they're picking up money from their bank account, their credit card to put it into their savings account. They have thoroughly confused the whole budgeting process.

3:50

Mr. Speaker, we've looked at the government's budgeting and the government's typical reply is: this is going to cost more money and these policies and procedures already exist. It's been highlighted that the Auditor General really analyzes past budgets, when the mistakes have already been made and hundreds of millions and maybe even billions have been wasted. That money could have been used elsewhere. A parliamentary budget officer would analyze the present state of affairs and help all of us legislators. In fact, I believe they would probably help the government make better decisions.

Now, the Alberta Liberals – and we thank the Wildrose. This is a good thing. The Liberals and the Wildrose agree on this. In fact, the former Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar had offered an amendment when the government was bringing in this results-based budgeting in 2012. His amendment was about fiscal accountability, responsibility, and it was about adding a parliamentary budget officer so that every political party would have accurate, current, and forward information in order to prepare, to make sure that we all support good fiscal policy. But that amendment was voted down by the government at that time. I thank the hon. members, you know, from the Wildrose for having the bill drawn up and bringing this forward, because the Alberta Liberals supported it then and we support it now regardless of which political party brings it forward.

The concept of an independent budget officer has enjoyed support across the country in federal and provincial governments: the Liberals, the New Democrats, and Conservatives alike. It's an idea with a broad appeal that no one political party claims ownership to but all agree is necessary across the country, whether it's federally or provincially. In Ontario the Liberals and the New Democrats worked on it. In Alberta the Liberals and the Wildrose agree on this concept.

Before the election we called this the fudge-it budget, that the government was taking an overly optimistic approach to their forecast. Guess what happened, Mr. Speaker? The day after the election: oops; we didn't see it coming. We called it the bankrupt budget. Suddenly the government used a whole different level of forecasting as an excuse to break all their promises and to hurt the very programs that built a great province and a strong society.

This budget we call the over-under budget. Over-under is where the government is not quite sure which way they want to go. What we do know is that regular middle-income and lower middle-income Albertans are overtaxed. Yeah, the billionaires are undertaxed. It's an over-under budget because regular middle-class, middle-income, lower middle-income Albertans are underserved by the very government that is elected to serve them when it comes to getting teachers for our children, nurses and family doctors and health staff for the sick and elderly, and the social workers that we need to care for our children in care.

Mr. Speaker, the government has put in its budget a lot of reactionary spending whereas if we actually invested in upstream prevention, we would not only save money; we would actually improve the lives of people. If we critically analyze every dollar

of spending and see if that dollar was well spent, we can actually have the resources to make the essential investments into early childhood development; full-day kindergarten; more teachers for our children, to reduce the class sizes; more support for those teachers; to embed social workers, mental health counsellors, nurses, nurse practitioners, police officers, school resource officers into the school system so that we can build our schools as community hubs, so that schools can be used for the whole community. But the government has no money to invest because they have mismanaged and wasted a lot of taxpayer money.

One thing that's very essential is the election of the budget officer, the process of selecting the budget officer. Simply having the office and then having the government appoint – you know, the officer can be a watchdog, or it can be a lapdog. If the government unanimously appoints their own hand-picked individual, they can set it up so that it's just another lapdog. We just elected an electoral officer that was unanimously supported by every political party. That's how the selection should be. It should be unanimous support by all political parties for the individual that is elected to serve in this position, not because one of our political parties has the vast majority of the votes on a committee. If there was an Alberta Liberal government – and my sincere hope is that it is time to have that government in place – we would want every political party here to have equal say on who that individual is.

Mr. Speaker, I simply believe that this province can do better, and it should do better. I would like to thank the hon. Member for Calgary-Fish Creek for bringing forward good public policy. Good ideas should be accepted regardless of the source, and they should not be rejected by the government because the source is not within that same government.

Thank you, hon. member. You have the support of the Alberta Liberals on this bill. I believe it's a good bill, and I believe it's a bill that would set this province back onto good fiscal prudence so that we can actually take that extra money that's being wasted right now, mismanaged, to invest in the essential services our children require, our seniors require, and working families require, so that we can actually cut taxes for the middle-income and lower middle-income Albertans and cut school fees and lower tuitions, lower the cost of bills so that we don't see fine Albertans into poverty. So, hon. member, thank you so much. The Alberta Liberals support prudent fiscal management and support this bill.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Thank you.

Are there others?

Then we will go to Innisfail-Sylvan Lake.

Mrs. Towle: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today in support of Bill 202 from the hon. Member for Calgary-Fish Creek. I'm speaking today in support of this bill, which is being tabled to protect Albertans against politically motivated misappropriation of their hard-earned tax dollars. Bill 202 is a private member's bill tabled by the hon. MLA for Calgary-Fish Creek. Private member's Bill 202 isn't just an idea; it's a sound structure that provides Albertans with clear parameters before dollars are spent.

This bill has seen support from the Calgary Chamber of Commerce as well as the Canadian Taxpayers Federation. The Calgary Chamber of Commerce has said that it only makes good business sense to operate government in a businesslike manner. The Calgary chamber talked about how their own businesses must operate within their budgets. Why not the PC government? The Calgary chamber has also said that Albertans run their households under budgets, that Albertans must budget for things like groceries, heat, shelter, transportation, saving for their next

vehicle, and putting aside for a rainy day. They said that if everyday Albertans can budget, why shouldn't our government?

It makes good business sense to create an office for an independent provincial budget officer, an office free of political influence and tasked to oversee and transparently report on government budgets and expenses. It makes sense for the Auditor General to audit and the independent budget officer to budget. That's how businesses are run.

The hon. Member for Calgary-Fish Creek has over 20 years in the political arena. She learned a long time ago that you listen to the will of the people. We have all learned that this government has not learned from those past mistakes. This government still believes that after 43 years in power they have autocratic rule. This government continues to believe they know better than everyday Albertans and that they in their wisdom have the right to spend tax dollars as they see fit.

Sadly, as we have seen in the last month, that's just not the case. The role of government is to ensure that when they spend even one dollar of taxpayer money, they remember that it's not their money. When you choose to use government resources to attend PC Party fundraisers, pick up your families from vacations, or have a genuine disrespect for those that elected you, then you know that the system has let Albertans down.

That's the beauty of Bill 202. Bill 202 provides for an independent budget officer, whose job would be to report to the Legislature on the estimated finances of the province, to provide a true and accurate picture of the state of Alberta, all of this without the political wrangling or the jargon that explains why this government no longer reports the budget in a way that all Albertans can understand. This officer would provide the government with realistic figures and economic trends and forecasts. This officer would produce the underlying economic data for provincial budgets. This officer would provide Albertans with transparency and accuracy.

4:00

The purpose of an independent budget officer is to produce budget estimates that are independent, unbiased, and untainted by political interference or political gain. There will be many members on the other side of this House who may want to support this bill, but they cannot. They may want to speak in favour of it, but they will likely have to oppose it. I remind those members that in a time of political hardship within your own party, you ran on a government for the people and to the people.

I'd like to take it one step further. Let's talk about the comments most recently made the Finance minister. The Minister of Finance talked about the budget coming to the opposition, that the opposition has an opportunity to review the budget. The budget, that time allotted, he talked about being an onerous and long process. However, what the Finance minister forgot to tell Albertans is that they've actually cut the time for budget review, that the government controls one hundred per cent the access that we have to the amount of time that we want to review the budget, and that even in a three-hour allocation of time in reality there is only 30 to 60 minutes in which the opposition can actually question the budget.

What the Finance minister also forgot to mention to Albertans – and I myself and my colleagues experienced this last year, and I'm sure we'll experience it again – is that if the minister doesn't want to answer the questions on the budget, quite frankly, he doesn't have to. Anyone who listens to budget estimates will find that there are many cases in which the minister runs the clock and talks all about the plan for Albertans rather than talking about the questions that actually relate to the budget.

As indicated as well by the Liberal member for the fabulous constituency of Edmonton-Centre, she's been here for 18 budget processes, and in 18 budget processes the last few budgets are the ones that no longer have line items and no longer allow us to really drill down into where the money is going.

One other thing the Minister of Finance also indicated is that, essentially, if we dare question how the budget is reported, we're not in line with other provinces or the federal government. The fact of the matter is that this budget is not reported in the same way as the federal government's, and it is not reported in the same way that Albertans expect. He goes on further to sort of insinuate and demean and bully other members who might ask questions about this.

Mr. Horner: Point of order, Mr. Speaker.

Mrs. Towle: And he goes on by saying . . .

The Speaker: Hon. member, the President of Treasury Board has risen on a point of order.

Citation and the point of order, please, hon. member.

Point of Order Inflammatory Language

Mr. Horner: Mr. Speaker, the citation is 23(h), (i), and (j). The hon. member just insinuated that I am bullying someone. She just insinuated that I am lying to this Assembly. I take great umbrage in that.

In fact, Mr. Speaker, in 2003 the government changed to the expense basis and followed the public-sector accounting standards and the Alberta financial management commission report. So the last four budgets under Premier Klein – 2003, 2004, 2005, and 2006 – were all done the same way. In fact, the public-sector accounting principles are followed by this government, and I would ask that the hon. member refrain from accusing me of bullying anyone on that side of the House.

The Speaker: The hon. Opposition House Leader for a response.

Mr. Anderson: Obviously, this isn't a point of order. The Member for Innisfail-Sylvan Lake feels very strongly that the minister is construing the budget in a way that makes it difficult for Albertans to understand and then being very condescending and bullying those who disagree with him. I think that that's a feeling that many people have. He can disagree with that feeling, but she has every right to state that. There is no point of order here, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Well, hon. members, I was listening, and I was just taking out Bill 202 to see where the member was going with this, to see if somebody was going to rise under *Beauchesne* 459 for relevance.

Mr. Rodney: Relevance.

The Speaker: Well, no. She was tying it to budget processes and so on.

However, as we know in this House, words sometimes do get used in ways that can be interpreted as being what the hon. President of Treasury Board has said. On the other hand, as the Member for Airdrie just clarified, they can also be used in another way intentionally or unintentionally.

So let's leave this matter as a point of clarification for now, but let's be very careful, hon. Member for Innisfail-Sylvan Lake and

all members. Just be respectful of each other. If nothing else, please be respectful of each other.

Let's carry on with your debate. You have four minutes left.

Debate Continued

Mrs. Towle: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Yes, I will go back to the relevance of it.

An independent budget officer would not allow the Minister of Finance to continue to say that anyone who questions the budget is doing it for political gain or politicizing the process. An independent budget officer would remove that armour that he arms himself with every single day.

Bill 202 would also eliminate the ability of the Premier to go on national or provincial TV and indicate that the reason the budget has to change so drastically, the reason they have to cut \$42 million from PDD, the reason they reduced the budgets of universities by some 7.2 per cent is because of the bitumen bubble. That wasn't a media presentation. That was actually the Premier saying it herself. An independent budget officer, because the process would be more open and transparent, would actually allow the government to stop misleading Albertans.

The other thing the independent budget officer would go on to allow is forecasting. The Minister of Finance indicated in his response that our province is different than other provinces. I highly doubt that we are any different. The province of Saskatchewan has oil and resource revenue. The province of B.C. has the same. Those provinces have to forecast. They have to do the exact same process as we do, and they have to listen to their constituents. Interestingly enough, the province of Saskatchewan is able to do all of that and stay in a balanced budget.

Many Albertans are small-business owners, and Bill 202 reflects that. Many Albertans are large-business owners. Each and every one of us has to forecast, each and every one of us has to answer to shareholders, and each and every one of us has to answer to the people that work for us. Bill 202 allows Albertans the same opportunity to do what small-business owners do every single day. Every single day we forecast. Every single day we live within our means. Every single day – and the Minister of Finance is right about this – we do leverage every opportunity. The difference between the government and business owners is that you're not using your own money. This government seems to have forgotten that they have no money, that they are using taxpayer money. So when you report to taxpayers, that report should be fulsome, should be complete, should be open, and it should be transparent. Bill 202 would do that.

The minister asked how an independent budget officer would benefit Albertans. Bill 202 would ensure that the government's budgetary process is wholly transparent and accountable. Bill 202 would empower the independent budget officer to review the budget and help the government allocate provincial dollars before they are spent. I know it's a novel idea, but it can be done. This officer would help keep Alberta's budgets on task, balanced, and focused, and that should not be too much to ask from a government who's been in power for 43 years. You would think that at least they could do that.

The officer would also look at creating more complex economic forecasts and providing guidance on how governments should prepare their budgets to better weather Alberta's inevitable boom-and-bust cycles, little things like the bitumen bubble, and, you know, all those rainy-day funds that have apparently blindsided the government for a decade or more. Every person in this room has lived through the boom and bust. Every single person in this room knows that the market goes up, the market comes down, and

the market goes up again. Every single time we say that we'll do it differently, and every single time we say that we won't spend as much as we did the last time because we have to save for a rainy day. Well, the rainy day comes every year, whether it's the fire in Slave Lake, whether it's the flooding in High River or a multitude of other events that are detrimental to this province, yet this government continues to underfund that line item in the budget.

Here are two examples of how the minister can understand – understand – how an independent budget officer could benefit Albertans. Let's look at the forecast, suggesting a cap for, say, ministerial meals. On the menu there's a big fat, juicy steak priced at \$99 and a very nice chicken cordon bleu meal for \$35. One would think you'd make better choices.

The Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

Is there anyone else who wishes to participate in this debate? I see Calgary-Shaw wanting in, so let's hear from Calgary-Shaw.

Mr. Wilson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to support this bill strongly, and I want to thank the hon. Member for Calgary-Fish Creek for bringing this forward. As I'm sure you're well aware, the Member for Calgary-Fish Creek has a long history of successfully bringing forward and passing private members' bills in this Assembly. She has been a long-time champion for children in this province. She has passed the protection of children involved in prostitution bill. She has passed an organ and tissue donation bill and the mandatory reporting of child pornography bill. She continues today with the tabling, and here we are in second reading of Bill 202, the Independent Budget Officer Act.

4:10

You know, Mr. Speaker, one of the greatest honours that I've had serving in this caucus is being able to serve with the Member for Calgary-Fish Creek. She exemplifies integrity, and this bill is very much in line and in order with that.

Many of the bills that she put up for debate and that have passed in this House before are about protecting the children in this province, and I'm proud to say that I believe this one is also, in a way, about protecting our children. The reason why many of us over on this side of the House talk about responsible budgeting and debt is because we recognize that essentially what we're doing is intergenerational theft. We are taking from our kids and our grandkids and forcing upon them the repayment of massive amounts of debt financing, that we, quite frankly, just don't believe is an ethical way of operating. So thank you to the hon. member for, again, bringing this forward and having this on our agenda today.

I believe this is necessary because it would allow this government to produce budgets and budget estimates that are unbiased and untainted by political interference. I think it's quite clear that, you know, that does happen in a partisan environment. It's the way the world operates. We accept that. You should accept that, understand that it's true. It is simply that. It's a truth in the world that we live in and operate in.

This would be a resource for all MLAs. It would level the playing field. Opposition would have access to independent analysis of budget numbers. It would be for ourselves currently as the Official Opposition, and the opposition party, the fourth party, and independent members would have access to the exact same information and would be able to hold the government to account at a much higher level than what they are right now because, quite frankly, we have to take the government at its word just based on the documents that they produce. We've seen before that some of the projections that they have are not necessarily, I would say, in

line with reality. That, I think, is what some of us have alluded to in the Alice-in-Wonderland budget that we saw back in 2012, pre-election, which allowed this Premier to go all over the province, to tour around, to promise to spend all kinds of money, and to spread and sprinkle pixie dust of 50 new schools and increased MSI funding of \$1.6 billion, all in the hope of having, I think, \$112-per-barrel oil at the time.

Mr. Anderson: Who knows? It was something like that.

Mr. Wilson: Yeah. It was ridiculously high, anyway.

I think the lesson that was learned was that, clearly, we shouldn't budget that much based on the commodity market.

The bitumen bubble is another reason why we believe strongly that an independent officer being able to look at budget projections and the realities of the money that is being spent or is going to be spent on projects is a critical function that we and many other governments in North America have employed, whether it be the federal government in Canada or all 50 states.

Let's just think for a moment about some of the ideas or some of the projects that we could have independent budget analysis done for, Mr. Speaker. There's the federal building, which started at a couple of hundred million dollars. It seems like every year we hear about another \$25 million being spent. You know, we now have a rooftop garden; we have a new suite that's being built up on the top level for, I guess, visiting dignitaries or whomever.

The Calgary South Health Campus, definitely a needed institution, started out as a \$500 million project and finished with about \$1.3 billion to \$1.4 billion spent on that. Again, it just boggles the mind how this government can stand there and say that they're getting these things right and they don't need an independent officer. Well, clearly they do.

The southwest ring road in Calgary is a critical piece of infrastructure, particularly for the residents in Calgary-Shaw, probably Calgary-Lougheed, Calgary-Fish Creek, who absolutely have been waiting for this to happen, waiting for it to become a reality. We have a Transportation minister who can't determine whether or not it's going to cost – I think he said between \$1.8 billion and \$10 billion. That is a phenomenally large window that he has left himself in terms of constructing this. When you look at other sections of the ring road, whether it be Edmonton or Calgary, in Calgary I believe there were 70 kilometres completed for less than \$2 billion. Now we have a 41-kilometre stretch that is going to cost – I guess the Finance minister alluded to perhaps \$5 billion at your chamber luncheon last week.

Again, when you do a per-kilometre analysis on that, the math just doesn't quite add up. So here is another perfect example of why an independent officer can look at this and go: that's just not quite right, and here is what the actual projected cost is going to be. Then we as the opposition could hold them to account, have a dialogue in public about these things.

Fifty new schools. Some people think it's going to cost about \$2 billion. Originally, in 2012, that was a \$2.4 billion promise, including the 70 modernizations as well. In the budget we have \$1.2 billion allocated. In some miraculous way they're going to be able to build 50 new schools and modernize 70 more, by the next election no less, for only \$1.2 billion.

Transmission lines. I know the Member for Rimbey-Rocky Mountain House-Sundre would like nothing more than to be able to stand up here and debate the cost of transmission lines in this province, but an independent budget officer would be able to tell us what that would cost beforehand. It would be nice to have fair and politically unaltered information regarding the financial position of this province.

When you look at some of the other independent offices that exist within our Legislature and in our province, they provide value, Mr. Speaker. The Child and Youth Advocate becoming an independent office was one of the few things that I applaud the Premier for doing when she became the Premier of the province. It was one of the first actions that she took, and it has boded well. The reason for that is because they took an office that was operating under the auspices of Human Services and made it independent. They were no longer, I guess, prone to any sort of government influence and could tell Albertans what it was that they felt was going on in our province without the fear of government repercussions.

The cost of this would be negligible as the work is already being done in the Ministry of Finance. It's just transplanting individuals working in that bureaucracy into an independent office.

Now, one of the Wildrose commitments is to truly be open and transparent, and we recognize, as I think the federal Conservatives did when they instituted their Parliamentary Budget Officer back in 2006 – just for the sake of history, Mr. Speaker, let's go back. In 2006 the Liberal government falls. The Conservative government runs a campaign around accountability, and one of their first acts when they became government with their minority government in '06 was the Federal Accountability Act. One of the reasons why they instituted the PBO was because of countless years of Liberal budgets where they miscalculated or misrepresented the numbers to the tune of billions of dollars. It allowed them to have election campaign spending that was inordinate, or they could go and campaign on a budget that was just not based on fact. Quite frankly, it seems like we're starting to see that here in Alberta. It's not something that's new, but it's something that we've certainly had to deal with.

Now, that Parliamentary Budget Officer wasn't fully independent – I think that was one of the mistakes they made when they created that office, and it did create some problems – but the opposition in Ottawa now refers to the PBO as an essential position. It's a thorn in the side of the government, Mr. Speaker, and that's why it's absolutely no surprise to anyone over here that the Minister of Finance nor anyone else – well, I guess they're not really going to speak to it – wants it on the governing side. It's an extra set of eyes on the books that they're trying to present to Albertans. It's not a surprise to us at all that we're not going to get support on this bill from the government.

But it does go to show the Alberta public the kinds of things that a Wildrose government would do, because we recognize that if we're going to govern this province differently, it starts with us, and it starts with being truly accountable and truly open. Having a second set of eyes on the books, having an independent budget officer is exactly one of the first steps that I believe we should be taking in the event that we do have the opportunity to govern in Alberta.

We've already covered why it's different than the Auditor General. Their current mandate is to look at an after-the-fact analysis of the spending, whereas an independent budget officer would be looking at spending programs that have yet to happen.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Thank you.

Are there others? Let us move on to Rimbey-Rocky Mountain House-Sundre, who wishes to speak.

4:20

Mr. Anglin: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It was good to hear the Minister of Finance get up and defend and yet politicize the

budget. This is exactly why this is being brought forward. An independent budget officer doesn't politicize it. It is nonpartisan. It's a process that's not new. It's a process that is actually working in other jurisdictions, and it works because an independent budget officer doesn't have a political agenda. They give economic forecasts. They provide analysis. They do it in the form of reports, testimony, memos, letters, and presentations. It also provides online access to key revenue and spending data for a number of past years.

Now, given what we have been through in our last two budgets – well, our last budget and this one that has yet to be approved – nothing can be clearer than the ongoing analysis at Stanford University looking at how governments present budgets. It's interesting because what the Stanford scholars are saying is that more and more governments are changing their reporting methodologies to hide deficits, and that is absolutely what's going on here. We have a government that has changed the way it reports so they can say that they have a balanced budget while they're actually borrowing money, while they're actually having a deficit, where the total revenue coming in is less than what we're spending, but that's fine because the way we change our reporting is that we're not going to show that deficit, and we're going to tell the public – we're going to put that nice little spin on it – that we actually have a surplus when in reality the numbers just don't add up. It goes on and on and on, dealing with this politicization of how we're spending our money.

Nothing is a better example of a number of these things, this misinformation hitting the public, than this commitment to build schools, throwing up signs to say that we are going to build X number of schools when, in fact, it's just not going to happen in the time frame that this government has said – and the industry has said that – but we presented in the budget that it will be done. To disguise this fact, we get a government who puts up signs and takes credit for schools that were approved under another administration and says, "That's part of our commitment," when, in fact, it wasn't. So you get this kind of misleading responsible government. [interjections] I'm splitting hairs, but if you want to call a point of order, call a point of order. I would be more than happy to defend it. But I don't know any other way to describe it. If you say that you're going to do something and you can't do it and that's verified by the people who are responsible for doing it, which is the construction industry, but you still commit to saying that it's being done, I don't know of any other way to describe it.

If you say that you're not running a deficit but the total income coming in does not match the amount that you're spending, which is far greater, I don't know how you can call that a balanced budget. You're borrowing. We're going into debt, and depending on how we're going into debt and how much we're going into debt, it's something I don't think Albertan's agreed to. I certainly didn't hear, when we campaigned two years ago, that that's what was going to happen, yet given the current trend we're looking at tens of billions of dollars here, and it could be as much as \$21 billion by the time we get into the election or more, depending on what our next budget is.

Again, it's how the budget is presented. That's what this bill takes care of. We get an independent officer that's not just in a sense qualified but with the fact that the independent officer himself has no partisan relationship. We've seen this work in other jurisdictions, and this is a jurisdiction that now begs for it, with the behaviour of our current government, to alter the way they report, to present it or spin it in a different way than what is actually happening. So when we look at budgets, how do we match it up with the previous budgets we've had? It's very difficult for the average person in the public to be able to do that

because we've changed the whole reporting mechanism by rolling out these three stages of our budget plan.

So we're dealing with this issue on a number of levels, and the Member for Calgary-Shaw actually touched on it. One of the issues we cannot get in this budget, that the typical municipality accomplishes, is: what is our infrastructure priority list? The best answer we can get from the minister is, "Look at the website," which is really nice, but there's nothing on the website that gives us a priority list. When a budget is presented at any municipal level, the infrastructure priority list is prioritized one through whatever, and the budget line is drawn at its appropriate level of what's funded and what is not funded. The argument always is about, right at that funded line, what projects should have a priority over another.

Now, we understand that when you have the natural disasters like the flood of last year, all bets are off. You have an emergency situation that has to be addressed. Certain things that were supposedly funded in the budget will now not get funded as we take care of the emergency. That is something that is commonplace, and the public understands. But without an infrastructure priority list nobody knows where these hospitals that are needed stand in relationship to other communities, nobody knows where our seniors' homes stand in relationship to other communities. So when the budget is reported, we get a sense of: will our projects get built this year, next year, three years down the road? We don't know. We can't even begin to measure that. That's what a budget reporting process is about, and that's where an independent budget officer has a lot of value and a lot of credibility in speaking to the communities and dealing with these budget issues to help these communities identify within the provincial budget where their values, where their programs, where their interests lie, and how they measure that.

It also makes governing, I think, a little bit more efficient. When a mayor of Rocky Mountain House knows that their hospital falls third in line behind two other communities, they can actually watch as one hospital gets built, and they should be moving up on the list. The mayor of that community will know that if some natural disaster were to happen at another hospital – a flood, damage, whatever reason – that money has to go to that repair because of that emergency basis, but they still know that they should keep their priority system, that they're going to be somewhere in that top three, that top two to get those critical-need infrastructure projects funded and eventually started and eventually built.

What we get when we don't have an infrastructure priority list is a hodgepodge situation that affects somewhere like the community of Bentley, where the minister promises that we're going to build a bypass, and we do it budget year after budget year after budget year and never fulfill that promise. Then they plop a sign down this year that says, "building Alberta," dig up the road, and then leave it not capped so that the silt runs off into the river and violates our environmental laws. The community is going to hold a centennial, and they've got a mess left behind by this building Alberta, and the project is now not going forward.

So what happens? What's the answer? How do we take care of it? This is the stuff that independent budget officers can actually help communities deal with and can actually help the government in dealing with a priority list. When the minister or the cabinet or the Treasury Board is contemplating their annual budget, have input from an independent budget officer on how well they managed the last one, without the partisanship, without the spin, to give them honest answers on the transparency and the actual implementation of that budget and how well it worked, how well

that performed based on what they constructed that previous year. That is a better tool moving forward.

If we don't have that tool, what we get is this idea that some of our people responsible are believing the spin. When they do that, they can't make well-informed decisions, and we get this hodgepodge of projects around the province. The last thing we can afford to do is waste money. That's what everybody always gets upset about in the political debates. All around Alberta, in every coffee shop, people look at waste.

The Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

Are there others who wish to speak to Bill 202? Let us go and recognize, then, Cardston-Taber-Warner.

4:30

Mr. Bikman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's an honour to rise and speak in support of this well-thought-out bill, much needed, I suggest.

It's been mentioned in this Chamber that the Auditor General performs this kind of function. Well, of course, we all know that auditors are reporting historic events. They can't do anything to prevent the waste that they may identify. They can give advice, suggest changes that ought to be made, follow up on that after the next budget year to see whether it's been acted on, and so on. But Bill 202, the Independent Budget Officer Act, that's been brought forward by the Member for Calgary-Fish Creek, is a preventative measure.

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

It kind of reminds me, being an old trucker, about the wisdom of changing the filter when you're changing the oil to prevent problems that could occur rather than waiting and paying for the expense of the problem subsequent to it happening. What we're seeing here and what I thank the hon. member for doing in bringing this bill forward is something that's preventative. It's way cheaper to change the filter than it is to replace the engine.

We know, too, from experience and business philosophy and wise people that have suggested this truth, that systems are perfectly aligned to achieve the results that they produce, so if we've got a problem, if we're consistently running deficits, as we see that we've been doing over the past number of years – no matter what you call it, if you spend more than you're taking in, you're borrowing, and that's a deficit position. You can redefine it, and you can call black "white," but you're not fooling anybody but your own Kool-Aid drinkers, I believe. We've been getting these kinds of results, and it's time to recognize the truth, that Alberta doesn't have a revenue problem. It has a spending problem.

Bill 202 would result in an independent budget officer who would be free from influence, free from intimidation and bullying. This officer would act in the best interests of all Albertans. He would be able to prevent an increase of debt, which at the current rate is projected to result in interest payments by 2017, just three years down the road, of \$840 million a year. Now, I don't know about you, but the people I'm talking to out there in my riding think that's scandalous. They think that it would be far better for us to be using that money to build schools debt free. You can build a lot of schools for \$840 million a year, lots of roads. You could hire lots of teachers and nurses and front-line workers with that money, that instead will be going to line the pockets of bankers and lenders.

Budgets are based on assumptions, Mr. Speaker, and a budget or a projection is only as good as the quality of the assumptions themselves. An independent budget officer would help us look at

and evaluate the validity of the assumptions that that budget is based on. If the assumptions were faulty, he could point that out. Again, it's a lot better to know ahead of time that something that you're basing a budget on is faulty instead of discovering it later. It's very expensive to find that after the fact. It's much better, much more prudent to anticipate those problems and strengthen the quality of your assumptions.

A hallmark of this government seems to be its desire to be unique and innovative. As they clamour to spend money to achieve this expensive goal, they demonstrate a pride that, I think, too often blinds them to successful solutions that are working elsewhere. My old dad, the grade 10 dropout, said: never be too proud to borrow a good idea. He was credited with several innovations that actually worked, taking somebody else's idea and making it better or just simply using a good idea that he saw somebody else doing that made the work easier or safer or less expensive.

Well, if 50 states, our own federal government, and an increasing number of provinces have adopted the principle of the concept of an independent budget officer, why wouldn't we? Now, I think that's a fair question. Why wouldn't we? Clearly, we wouldn't because it works. It reins in and makes more difficult partisan spending, and that's just what we need to do. We need to stop that. We need to prevent it. It avoids using taxpayers' money for partisan purposes. Remember, Mr. Speaker, governments have no money of their own. It's all taxpayers' money. It's a sacred stewardship that bears the responsibility of the public purse.

Spending royalty receipts instead of saving and investing them, like in Premier Lougheed's visionary creation, the heritage savings trust fund, is foolhardy. The government is selling assets, the assets that all Albertans own: the oil that's in the ground, the natural gas that's in the ground. That's an asset. We're selling it, and we're treating the revenue that's received as if it was income, as if we were doing something that added wealth when, in fact, we're selling an asset. We're disposing of an asset. It's like eating your own seed corn. This government continues to do that, and nobody is holding them to account. [interjection] But the Albertans that I'm talking to, Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar and anybody else that wishes to interject and interrupt – if you're not listening to your own people, shame on you. Every coffee shop I go into and every conversation I have is: "Can't you stop the government from wasting our money? Can't you get them to save and invest in our future? Why are we saddling our future generations with debt now when if we were more prudent we wouldn't be in this position?"

The hon. member that sits next to me mentioned the fact that when you have these floods and these rainy-day events, then naturally you have to make some adjustments to your budget. Well, you know what? We created a rainy-day fund. But instead of saving that money for the rainy days that inevitably come, we spent it to buy elections, to buy popularity, and it's this partisan spending that an independent budget officer would help prevent.

I believe that all small "c" fiscally conservative members of this House ought to join me in voting in support of Bill 202, the Independent Budget Officer Act.

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

I'll recognize the next speaker, the hon. Member for Lacombe-Ponoka.

Mr. Fox: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm honoured to rise and speak in support of my colleague from Calgary-Fish Creek's bill today, Bill 202. Bill 202 was introduced into the House on the day before

the budget was read, and I can assure all the hon. members that the timing of this was no coincidence.

Mr. Speaker, my Wildrose colleagues and I predicted the budget to be full of double-talk, and it was. We predicted that the budget documents would be split apart in an effort to confuse Albertans, and they were. We predicted the budget figures would be hand-picked and spun to look favourable for the government, and they were. This government has put Alberta \$5 billion further into debt to deliver a budget that they, incredibly, claim as balanced. Not quite sure how you balance a budget with a deficit number, but this government did it. Bravo.

Mr. Bikman: They changed the definitions.

Mr. Fox: They changed the definitions. That's right. They changed the definition. We know it's not balanced, Mr. Speaker. It's not even close to being balanced. Estimates of the forecast deficit range from \$1.8 billion to \$3.9 billion, and our budget crunching pegs it at about \$2.7 billion. Why is that? It's because we don't actually have access to the same information that the government has access to. This is something that would be rectified by this budget officer, somebody who would actually be independent and would provide all members of this Legislature with the same information.

This is a government-made problem, but it also affects our ability as elected officials to provide our constituents with accurate accounting information of the province's fiscal picture. This type of financial reporting is not only irresponsible, Mr. Speaker, but it's dishonest. Albertans deserve better. Bill 202 seeks to remedy this going forward by providing an opportunity for members and ultimately the public to receive government information and budget estimates through an independent third party that reports directly to this Legislature.

The mandate of the Alberta independent budget officer would be to

- (a) provide independent analysis to the Legislative Assembly about the state of [the province's] finances, including the budget and quarterly updates, and the trends in the provincial and national economies;
- (b) when requested to do so by a committee of the Legislative Assembly, undertake [the] research for that committee into [the province's] finances and economy.

It would also

- (c) when requested to do so by a committee of the Legislative Assembly that is mandated to consider the estimates of the government, undertake research for that committee into those estimates; and
- (d) when requested to do so by a member of the Legislative Assembly or a committee of the Legislative Assembly, estimate the financial cost of any proposal that relates to a matter over which the Legislative Assembly has jurisdiction.

4:40

This independent budget officer would provide financial figures, economic trends and forecasts as well as produce the underlying economic data for the provincial budgets, something that we don't see very often in this Legislature. In fact, I don't think we saw it in this past budget.

Mr. Speaker, simply put, the IBO would be responsible for the independent analysis of both the province's revenue and expenditure streams while appropriately leaving the policy and the programming decisions that affect those streams under the purview of the elected officials, where they need to be. The IBO also, more importantly, would be able to independently begin research on items it deems appropriate and report on them to this

Legislature. The proposed IBO is not a revolutionary idea, not at all. In fact, most parliaments and Legislatures already have an independent budget office. The United Kingdom, the Parliament of Canada, U.S. Congress, and all 50 Legislatures south of our border have independent budget officers. Why is Alberta so different, Mr. Minister? Why don't we have one here, and why did you stand to speak against this bill, Mr. Minister? An independent budget officer has been long advocated for by organizations like the Calgary Chamber of Commerce and the Canadian Taxpayers Federation, both of which have come out in support of this bill.

I'd like to thank the hon. Member for Calgary-Fish Creek once again for putting forward a bill that will help the finances of this province, help Albertans be able to better understand the finances of this province, and have the opposition and Albertans hold this government to account.

Mr. Speaker, today the oft-quoted Mr. Derek Fildebrandt of the Canadian Taxpayers Federation said: "If there is just one piece of legislation MLAs should pass right now, Bill 202 is it. An independent budget officer is badly needed to bring Alberta back to comprehensible financial reporting." I'd have to agree with this statement. It wasn't long ago that Alberta became one of the first jurisdictions to make it mandatory to release consolidated budget updates every quarter. Taking that step was a source of pride for the government. It was a key to rebuilding trust with Albertans after an era of reckless spending. Where are we again? Here we are in another era of reckless spending.

By being open and transparent with the consolidated budget numbers, Albertans were able to see and measure how the government managed their finances. Today's PC government has reversed all of the progress that was made. Where Alberta was once a leader in budget transparency, this PC government repealed the Government Accountability Act and has pulled the wool back over Albertans' eyes. They're obscuring the truth from Albertans, and it needs to stop.

We're not reinventing the wheel with this idea, Mr. Speaker, but what we are doing is proposing a way for all members of this Assembly to better represent their constituents. The Wildrose believes the independent budget officer is an important step towards a more reasonable and accountable government and is another example of how the Wildrose is proposing new ideas that put Albertans first.

As I'd mentioned earlier, last year the government repealed the Government Accountability Act. They did that in Bill 12. When that act was passed, in 1995, Mr. Speaker, the province of Alberta was a leader. We were the first province in the country to adopt a publicly recorded, results-based, performance-measured framework into our budgeting process. That act was designed to improve accountability between civil servants, elected officials, the government, and the citizens of Alberta. It was so well-regarded by Canadians that other provinces introduced similar legislation, finally with the federal government following suit in 2006, giving royal assent to the Federal Accountability Act.

It is important, I think, Mr. Speaker, to look back at 1995 and really examine what the Government Accountability Act was all about then. The Premier of that day, Mr. Klein, made quite an impact on how finances were done at the time. He epitomized the era. Knowing that Mr. Klein not only led the charge on eliminating the deficit by 1995, back at a time when a deficit wasn't hope, debt wasn't hope, unlike now, when we have this government telling us that debt is hope, it comes as no surprise that he also coined the phrase "the Alberta advantage." Something else that comes as no surprise is that this government has done away with not only his vision of a debt-free Alberta but also in the same breath is destroying the Alberta advantage, too.

What happened in the Finance minister's Fiscal Management Act is that the PC government seems to have us now in a race to the bottom. Future government budgets need no longer list any of the following requirements from the Government Accountability Act's accepted terms of operation: total revenue from all sources, total expenses with breakdown, accumulated debt, planned payments, reconciliation of expenses and revenues for a deficit or surplus; in other words, a dramatic shift away from the reporting of performance measures that we had in past budgets. Wow, what a policy shift. Here we are, back to where we are today, in debt, not that far away from where we were in 1992. What is it going to be by 2016-17? Twenty-one billion dollars of debt, Mr. Minister? That's quite scary. I don't think that's hopeful for the future. That's fearful. That's fearful for the future.

I also have to question where the accountability minister, the Associate Minister of Accountability, Transparency and Transformation, is on this piece of legislation. He hasn't stood up to support the Member for Calgary-Fish Creek and something that actually would make this government more accountable, more transparent, which is exactly his mandate.

If the government votes down this piece of legislation, where is the commitment to transparency? I don't see it when I look across the aisle here. I don't see it when government members stand up and oppose legislation that is designed to make the books of this province more transparent so that Albertans get a clear understanding of where this province stands.

I'd like to thank the Member for Calgary-Fish Creek one more time because this is such an important piece of legislation. This is something that would bring us into line with all the other jurisdictions in North America.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

I recognize the next speaker, the Member for Calgary-Buffalo.

Mr. Hehr: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It is always an honour to rise in this House and discuss public policy and to speak on Bill 202 and lend my voice as being in support of this very forward-looking bill.

If you look throughout the direction that many governments have gone, they've gone to bringing in an independent budget officer, which allows them to assess government books and numbers and various practices in an open and forthright way, which has led to a keen sense of both having government understand where the money is going and allowing for great assistance to opposition members to look at government budgets and to look how the money is being spent.

Most importantly, Mr. Speaker, the independent officer has allowed the average Joe and Jane Citizen to be able to credibly assess spending and revenue streams and the like and assess whether governments of the day are truly getting value for the dollars they have spent.

If we look over the course of time at what we've had here in Alberta, as of late we could really use an independent budget officer. You'll remember, taking us back to Budget 2013, that we had a dramatic change in how the government seemingly managed its accounts. It went from what was considered a very open and transparent fashion, put forward by Mr. Klein and his people, in terms of how much revenue was coming into this province and how much money was spent. It simply allowed individuals to assess in an open and transparent fashion what our true net debt position was.

We see what transpired last year around budget time. The Fiscal Management Act is essentially an act that, in my view, obfuscates

the numbers. It allows government to change its accounting practices from what was I think at one time considered a gold standard – I think I've heard that term somewhere before – in terms of financial accounting, and it really was. Don't get me wrong, Mr. Speaker. I disagree vehemently with many of the things that were done in this province in the '90s and early 2000s, but none of them were that act. That act actually was a change for the better, a change for open and transparent government.

4:50

There had long been, I guess, rumours and, actually, almost more of a real acceptance that government books from 1985 through to 1993 were not very good, were not very open, were not very transparent, and that the public didn't have a true sense of what was happening in this province. To my mind, that is happening at this time as we speak. You will note that in 2012, when we all left the budget, no opposition party knew the exact number of what our net deficit or even net debt position was. That, to me, is disappointing.

In any event, you know, I think that the independent budget officer proposed in Bill 202 will help us cut through the government spin, will allow us in this House to do our jobs better, will allow government, both people on the front bench and otherwise, to look at things a little more clearly, and will allow for the Alberta people to get a good handle on where their money has been spent.

I support this bill, and my hope is that we all get behind this move towards openness and transparency in this province. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

We just have a few minutes left for another speaker, if need be, and then the hon. member will be able to close.

The hon. Member for Strathmore-Brooks.

Mr. Hale: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to rise today on second reading of the hon. Member for Calgary-Fish Creek's private member's bill, Bill 202, the Independent Budget Officer Act. This act would create an independent budget officer to provide consistent and nonpartisan analysis of the province's finances, including quarterly updates and the Alberta budget.

This bill is needed now more than ever. In the past two years what was formerly a clear-cut event based on numbers has become a circus, with multiple guesses on the state of Alberta's finances. The Wildrose determined the deficit at \$2.7 billion. The Canadian Taxpayers Federation projected a \$3.9 billion deficit. However, the PC government shamelessly tried to pass it off as a surplus.

So what's going on here? Well, for one, the PC government has decided to mask the nature of financial reporting by splitting capital and operating budgets. By not including capital spending, like we'd done for years, the government is trying to pass off a deficit as a surplus. The result has been various means of determining the real deficit and a general sense of confusion for all. While everyone has acknowledged that revenues were better than expected this year, few are buying the government's perspective on this. The lack of financial clarity speaks to the lack of integrity and honesty of a 43-year-old government, not to any one particular person within this PC government.

The reality is that a deficit is a deficit. Albertans deserve clarity on what happens with their tax dollars. Bill 202 will fix this problem and will re-establish transparency in Alberta's financial reporting. It would provide assurance to businesses and taxpayers.

Bill 202 includes several constructive measures to ensure Albertans get the real numbers they deserve.

The new independent budget officer would provide an independent analysis to the Legislative Assembly about the state of the province's finances. The budget officer could undertake research into the province's finances and economy when requested to do so by a committee and could undertake research on budget estimates for a committee if requested.

In short, the independent officer would constitute an important check on government predictions of revenue and expenditures, thus preventing governments from playing games with the numbers. The officer could become a critical tool of government committees doing vital work on budget estimates.

The idea behind Bill 202 already has some substantive endorsements. The Canadian Taxpayers Federation as well as the Calgary Chamber of Commerce have echoed the need for such an office. The chamber noted that budget numbers that are credible and widely trusted help businesses plan to prepare their own business plans without the uncertainty of rising taxes, delayed capital spending, and excessive public borrowing.

That's what's at stake here, the credibility of the provincial government, a government that will not provide the real numbers consistently and cannot maintain the respect of its citizens. Businesses and stakeholders base their plans on the projections of the provincial government, and the inability to provide clear direction hurts industry and business.

Bill 202 will bring back credibility to the government's finances. The expense of creating an independent budget office would be very small. Certainly, it would be an investment in the future, with the potential to clear up misunderstandings and foster a culture of financial honesty in the provincial government. For a minimal cost Albertans would reap the benefits of responsible and transparent financial reporting for generations to come.

Such an office would not be unique to Alberta. In fact, all 50 U.S. states have an independent budget officer as does the government of Canada and the United Kingdom. Ontario is currently working on setting up an independent budget office. We can see that the trend internationally and nationally is to support the creating of an independent budget officer.

I hope all members will support this bill and bring the transparency Albertans deserve. Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

If there are no other speakers, I'll invite the Member for Cypress-Medicine Hat.

Mr. Barnes: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I just want to take two seconds and say, you know, that I very, very much appreciate the spirit and the intention of the bill and the excellent work that my colleagues have done on this. Two of the reasons why I did join the Wildrose: one is for the value of free votes – that has been resonating very, very well in my constituency – and the second one is for the value of fiscal responsibility.

I took a look at some of the numbers. There are 29 government ministers and associate ministers, the most in Albertan history. There are at least 250 public commissions, boards, and agencies in Alberta, spanning across all ministries. We have seven advocates . . .

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. member, the time for debate has passed.

I would invite the hon. Member for Calgary-Fish Creek, if she decides to, to close debate.

Mrs. Forsyth: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to rise and close debate on Bill 202, the Independent Budget Officer Act. I have sat here and listened very intently to the conversation, and I guess what's fascinating to me more than anything is the fact that all of the conversation, all the debate has come from this side of the House, the Official Opposition. You know, you have a government that says that they're open, accountable, and transparent, and they've tried to defend the way they do the budgeting of the books, but we've only had the Provincial Treasurer stand up and speak. Yet we've had comments from members who I have stood up and encouraged to speak.

If I may, Mr. Speaker, I'm going to ask for everyone in the Assembly to support this bill.

The Deputy Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

[The voice vote indicated that the motion for second reading lost]

[Several members rose calling for a division. The division bell was rung at 4:58 p.m.]

[Ten minutes having elapsed, the Assembly divided]

[The Speaker in the chair]

For the motion:

Anderson	Fox	Rowe
Anglin	Hale	Sherman
Bikman	Hehr	Swann
Blakeman	Notley	Towle
Fenske	Pedersen	Wilson
Forsyth		

5:10

Against the motion:

Amery	Horne	Olesen
Barnes	Horner	Quadri
Bhardwaj	Johnson, L.	Quest
Casey	Khan	Rodney
Cusanelli	Klimchuk	Sandhu
DeLong	Kubinec	Sarich
Denis	Lemke	Starke
Dorward	Leskiw	VanderBurg
Fritz	Luan	Woo-Paw
Griffiths	McIver	Xiao
Hancock	Oberle	

Totals:	For – 16	Against – 32
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[Motion for second reading of Bill 202 lost]

The Speaker: Hon. members, before we proceed with the next item of business, could I get your unanimous consent to revert briefly to Introduction of Guests?

[Unanimous consent granted]

Introduction of Guests

(reversion)

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie if you would, please.

Mr. Bhardwaj: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's an honour for me to rise today and introduce to you and through you to all members of this Assembly a good friend for many, many years – in fact, we've known each other since long before we entered politics – Councillor Amarjeet Sohi. Of course, he's our

councillor for ward 12 – Edmonton-Mill Creek, Edmonton-Ellerslie, and Edmonton-Mill Woods are part of it – a good friend of yours, Edmonton-Manning and Edmonton-Mill Woods, and of many other people here, a tireless advocate for human rights.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Thank you.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much. I wanted to welcome Councillor Sohi as well. But I am particularly impressed and enthused by the number of people that have come here today to hear the debate on Motion 502, and I would like those individuals to please rise and be welcomed by the Assembly. It's nice to have so many.

The Speaker: Thank you, hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre and hon. Associate Minister of Services for Persons with Disabilities, for introducing a number of people who belong to Edmonton-Mill Creek, the riding that I'm happy to represent, including hon. Councillor Sohi. Thank you very much.

Motions Other than Government Motions

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Lac La Biche-St. Paul-Two Hills.

Alberta Human Rights Act

502. Mr. Saskiw moved:

Be it resolved that the Legislative Assembly urge the government to introduce legislation to repeal section 3(1)(b) of the Alberta Human Rights Act to restore the freedom of speech of all Albertans.

Mr. Saskiw: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is a great privilege to rise today and speak on Motion 502, which encourages the government to repeal the hurt feelings legislation that is currently in force in Alberta; that is, to repeal paragraph 3(1)(b) of the Alberta Human Rights Act. At the outset, nothing in this motion deals with discrimination or racism in employment matters, business matters, et cetera. Those protections still exist in the Alberta Human Rights Act and should stay there. Racism and discrimination should never be tolerated.

Motion 502 deals with free speech and only with that specific clause in the legislation. By passing this motion, we'd be following in the steps of Prime Minister Stephen Harper and his government. Federally we saw free speech championed by the Member of Parliament for Westlock-St. Paul, Brian Storseth, who is actually a constituent of mine. When Brian was speaking on his federal bill, he said:

Truth is no longer a defence. The person would no longer have the right to due process, the right to a speedy trial, or even the right to a lawyer to defend himself or herself. In fact, in 90% of the human rights investigations under the Canadian Human Rights Act under section 13, the defendants do not even have legal advice, because they simply cannot afford it.

Mr. Speaker, I am confident that the same is true here in Alberta.

Now, I know that this doesn't happen often, but I do want to point out that this is an area of policy and principle where the Premier and I fully agree with each other, and I do want to point out that the Premier is a well-respected human rights lawyer here in Alberta and abroad. During her campaign for the leadership in the summer of 2011 she stated that she'd repeal the clause, and I trust that her party and MLAs will support her call to action on this.

In fact, she specifically stated, and I quote: freedom of expression must be shielded, and section 3 of the Alberta Human Rights Act should be repealed. That is exactly what the purpose of the motion here today is. The Premier rightfully stated in this regard that freedom of expression must be shielded. Even the Minister of Justice and I agree on this, and we have for some time. Now, I know it's not often that three lawyers can agree on something, but I think it is clear how badly this is needed when so many people in this Assembly can all agree.

This is and should be a motion with broad-based, multipartisan support. There has been a lot of talk recently about hate speech, and I want to be abundantly clear. Hate speech is covered in the Criminal Code. Inciting violence is in the Criminal Code. Discrimination with respect to speech is in the Criminal Code. That is where it should be. That is where it should stay. Those laws should be upheld, and those who violate those laws should be prosecuted to the fullest extent possible.

With the Criminal Code the investigations are done by the RCMP, and they have specialization in this area. With the Criminal Code there are real Queen's Bench judges that adjudicate. The accused has rights such as the presumption of innocence, the right to counsel, and the rules of evidence that apply, and of course if someone is convicted, there is serious punishment that can be applied, including jail time. We are not talking about turning a blind eye towards legitimate human rights violations, and we are not talking about allowing discrimination. We are talking about free speech. Simply stated, we have the right to offend one another without being prosecuted by the state for our beliefs or our opinions.

Now, a lot of people asked me why we need this legislation repealed, and I understand why. Some have done a masterful job of telling Albertans and Canadians that civilization is going to end if we allow free speech, if we allow people to have their own beliefs and values, that we don't need to allow free speech because some people might disagree, and that we don't need freedoms because we, everyday folk, won't know how to make our own decisions. Well, I respectfully disagree. Some often quote reports and figures from the United Nations. I think the universal declaration of human rights is pertinent as it states:

Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.

Alberta has always led the way in advancing the freedoms, liberties, and human rights of our citizens both at home and around the world. We had the first female magistrate in the Commonwealth. We had the first female MLAs. The first MP of the Reform Party was a woman from northeastern Alberta, and she went on to be the first female leader of the federal Official Opposition.

I'm not going to stand here and pretend that my opinion is the only opinion that matters, and I'm not going to stand here and pretend that no one else is entitled to their own opinion. In fact, I stand here to defend every single Albertan's right to express their own opinions and beliefs and to do so without living in fear of persecution. I don't have to agree with them all the time. In fact, I might be offended by what some people say, but I'm okay with being offended. I want us to live and have free public debate, where people can say things that I disagree with. It's a belief that people have fought for and died for, to ensure that we have the right to disagree with one another. It's the foundation of a free and fair and democratic society.

If we repeal paragraph 3(1)(b), we have the opportunity to make Alberta the freest place in Canada. We have the chance to become

true defenders of liberty and freedom, and we have the chance to make Alberta and Canada a better place for future generations in years to come. As I mentioned, we would be following in the steps of the federal government by taking action, and the beauty of this is that they have proven that it can be done. It is possible to be a defender of free speech and to have free speech and not have your country fall apart. Last I checked, the sun still rises in the morning, and it still sets at night, and life still goes on.

5:20

But what changes is that people are not being called before a state-controlled commission because someone had their feelings hurt. I want you to keep in mind that our justice system is based on the principles of justice and equality, and these state-controlled commissions are not part of our justice system. They do not have to adhere to the rules of evidence, and there are no mechanisms to address vexatious claims. There are no rules of evidence or even of proof. It's just based on what one person says they feel.

This type of clause has no place in Alberta, and it is unconscionable to allow it to continue. I know that we are going to have a lively and fulsome debate this afternoon, Mr. Speaker, and I want to point out to my colleagues that when I disagree with them, it's okay. The world is not going to end. And if they disagree with me, I will be just fine. Life will go on.

So if the basic principle of equality and justice applies in this Chamber, why should it not apply to all Albertans? We are no better in this House and we are not extra special, so why is it that Albertans should not have the right to free speech that we are enjoying here right now?

With that, Mr. Speaker, I open the floor to debate, and I trust that my hon. colleagues will hold true to the promise made by their leader, the Premier, to defend the rights of all Albertans by repealing this legislation. It's not often that we as politicians have the opportunity to truly walk the walk, but today we do, and I look forward to having the support of my colleagues.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Justice and Solicitor General, followed by Edmonton-Strathcona, followed by the leader of the Liberal opposition.

Mr. Denis: Thank you very kindly, Mr. Speaker. I first would like to thank the Member for Lac La Biche-St. Paul-Two Hills for bringing this forward. I want to assure him that he offends me every day.

All kidding aside, I do want to thank several people. To the people in the galleries here, to Councillor Sohi: thank you very much for joining us. I also wanted to thank the Member for Fort Saskatchewan-Vegreville for shepherding a free vote on this matter. I've always felt that I can speak my mind as part of the PC caucus, and I will express my opinion here today as well.

Long before I was even elected, the Minister of Infrastructure referred to people in his area when he was a city councillor as his bosses, and that's really had a very strong impact upon me as an MLA. You have to represent your constituents first. You represent your bosses. I've had a lot of e-mails from people in my area on this issue, pro and con, but also a lot of church groups have contacted me.

Now, section 3, Mr. Speaker, is a very complex issue. I recall that the Minister of Education, when we were talking about this, advised me on this matter not to be a lawyer. It is difficult sometimes to unlearn your own profession, but I think that was sage advice from him.

Freedom of speech is one of the cornerstones of a free and democratic society. Mr. Speaker, it is guaranteed by section 2 of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, which declares that "freedom of thought, belief, opinion and expression, including freedom of the press and other media of communication," is a fundamental freedom. It's also subject, though, to reasonable limitations in a free and democratic society, which is section 1 of the Charter.

It was also suggested to me in discussions that we've had to look at what section 3 actually talks about. It deals with a publication, notice, sign, symbol, emblem . . . that

(b) is likely to expose a person or a class of persons to hatred or contempt

because of . . . race, religious beliefs, colour, gender, physical disability, mental disability, age, ancestry, place of origin, marital status, source of income, family status or sexual orientation.

Now, I can say with a degree of certainty that no one in this Chamber stands for this type of discrimination, including me. When I was looking through this, I had a chat with my mother, Marguerite, on the weekend, and she mentioned to me about my grandfather, Phil, who's unfortunately not with us, and his experience in Abbey, Saskatchewan, in the '40s and '50s. With my family being of German descent, Mr. Speaker, they faced significant discrimination at that time even though many of them were already here and fought overseas with the Allied forces during World War II.

Of course, Mr. Speaker, there were atrocities committed by the Nazi regime at that particular time, and what happened is that there was a swastika that was painted on my grandfather's white picket fence. People knew of the service that the family was doing, but it didn't stop the prejudice. I remember him talking to me about that as a kid, and I also remember talking to my uncle Jerome, actually one of the teachers of the minister of jobs. When my uncle Jerome was five years old, two older kids put a noose around his neck and, until adults intervened, were prepared to hang him. This type of hatred in the particular community at that time resulted in my family leaving the particular community.

Mr. Speaker, I think it's important that we have respect for diversity of all people's backgrounds. I don't think anyone should ever have to leave their community. Alberta should be open for people of all particular backgrounds or walks of life.

Now, Mr. Speaker, why do I bring that particular instance up? Because it goes way beyond the issue of freedom of speech. I go back to this. If I disapprove of what you say, I'll defend to the death your right to say it: that's Voltaire. I would say, along the same lines, that it's far too easy for any of us to trumpet free speech when we agree with it, only to try to run it down when we disagree with it. I would say to you also that the true test of whether you support the principle of freedom of speech is whether you will defend someone's right to do it when you disagree with what they say.

Now, if I have any difference with the Member for Lac La Biche-St. Paul-Two Hills today, it's that I wanted to just indicate a couple of stats. Section 3 complaints to the Human Rights Commission are relatively rare. In 2012 fewer than 1 per cent cited section 3. In 2011 there were two. In 2010 there was one. In 2009 there were zero. Most of the complaints to the Human Rights Commission deal with employment practices, accommodations, and services, serious violations of human rights. I support the Human Rights Commission's mandate that people should not have to have a lawyer when they're discriminated against to deal with their particular rights.

That being said, section 3 is an issue warranting debate. I will take us to the Lund decision. This began in 2002 with a letter to

the *Red Deer Advocate*. Let me make it clear. I totally and completely disagree with the writer of this letter and the comments that he had particularly made. This went to the courts throughout almost 10 years. The Canadian Civil Liberties Association intervened. Like me, they didn't agree with the views, but they didn't feel that it warranted sanction at all.

The Minister of Municipal Affairs – we were talking about this once – told me that when examining a legislative change, the first question should be why, and I agree with him. One of the strongest arguments for amending section 3 came from the court itself. In this appeal Justice O'Brien condemned the current wording of section 3 for its language, lack of clarity, and even stated that “lack of clarity will cast a chill on the exercise of the fundamental freedoms, such as freedom of expression and religion.” Particularly troubling to me is the word “likely,” which leads to the lack of clarity.

The Court of Appeal in the same decision wrote:

The objective of statutory interpretation is to discern the legislative intent from the language of the legislation, if possible, and to give effect to such intent. This objective becomes difficult to attain when there is conflict, imprecision, or a lack of clarity in the legislation.

It was further stated that

the citizens of this Province are entitled to certainty when it comes to exercise of their fundamental rights . . . In my view, it would serve the interests of the citizens of this Province if the Legislature would direct its attention to this objective.

Now, this comment from Justice O'Brien clearly gives good reason for the discussion that we're having here today.

The Member for Lac La Biche-St. Paul-Two Hills talked about hate crimes being in the Criminal Code. He's quite correct. They're in sections 318 and 319 of the Criminal Code, and I won't go through that for the sake of time. One thing I will go through is that it says, “Every one who advocates [can be] guilty of an indictable offence and liable to imprisonment . . . not exceeding five years,” and it talks about the same groups that we did in section 3. If you look also at the actual case law on it, the Ahenakew decision in 2003 or the Keegstra in 1990, this section is used.

Another topic worth discussing is whether or not having a section like this works against its intended purpose by drawing more attention to the hateful views of an individual than if they had not been prosecuted. I ask this: would we be talking about the Boissin case today had a complaint not been lodged under this particular section? I'd say: probably not.

The Canadian Civil Liberties Association stated in its brief in this case, “Generally, the proper response to speech that is offensive, distasteful, or upsetting is counter-speech,” and I agree.

In many issues I do see the left-right continuum, Mr. Speaker, but not this one. I've had meetings with the Rocky Mountain Civil Liberties Association and the Sheldon Chumir foundation in Calgary, hardly bastions of right-wing thought, and they have advocated for changes to this section. I'd like to quote the Sheldon Chumir foundation in regard to section 3.

Section 3 can also have a chilling effect on discussion of controversial issues of importance to the public. Leaving the current law in place also means that the human rights commission will continue to be distracted by this debate, which has undermined its authority and led to questions about its existence. No government that believes in upholding human rights would allow this situation to continue.

I'd also mention that I'm not the only one that's talked about this. Here's another quote that I completely agree with and that would sum up my entire argument, Mr. Speaker.

I would suggest that there are provisions in our Criminal Code which deal more effectively with freedom of speech and when it borders on hate crime, and we should leave it in the Criminal Code context. I don't believe this is handled well through our human rights boards. What happens is that people are dragged to these committees for publishing and sometimes saying things which may be abhorrent but that, nevertheless, they are allowed to say. There's a place for them to be taken to task, and it's through the Criminal Code.

Those are not my words. Those are the words of the Member for Calgary-Buffalo. I think they are wise words and sage advice.

5:30

Mr. Speaker, politics is a team sport. Any one of us could bring forward a piece of legislation, but without others you're going to be the only one voting for it. I've been of this opinion, that I've espoused long before I had been elected to this Chamber. I will indicate that I hope that my words have convinced some of my own caucus as well as the opposition as to why I will be supporting this motion. I welcome the comments of everyone in this debate, even those with whom I may disagree.

Remember first that yesterday was St. Finian's Day. Today is St. Patrick's Day. We're all wearing green today. Let's also have a good time.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Thank you.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona, followed by the leader of the Liberal Party.

Ms Notley: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I am pleased to be able to get up to participate in the debate around Motion 502. Let me begin by just cleaning up the name of lawyers. I'm the fourth lawyer involved in this debate, and I will now be the lawyer that does not agree with the other three lawyers. I am very much opposed to this motion, and I urge my colleagues in this House to reject this motion.

We've been talking a lot about what the Court of Appeal in Alberta has said. But more recently, in 2013, the Supreme Court of Canada ultimately had to render a decision on similar legislation in Saskatchewan as a result of activities by a fellow named Whatcott, who has also, of course, spread his joy in Alberta. In the course of doing that, the Supreme Court said as follows:

Hate speech may often arise as part of a larger public discourse but it is speech of a restrictive and exclusionary kind. Political expression contributes to our democracy by encouraging the exchange of opposing views. Hate speech is antithetical to this objective in that it shuts down dialogue by making it difficult or impossible for members of the vulnerable group to respond, thereby stifling discourse.

Free speech is important but not to the extent that it infringes on anyone else's ability to feel safe or secure. That is what the Supreme Court of Canada has said about this issue.

Now, let's put this motion coming from our friends over there in the Official Opposition in context. This is the third plank, I would argue, of a three-plank effort thus far, through the combined efforts of this Conservative government and the Wildrose opposition, to undermine human rights in this province.

In 2008-2009 we had the introduction of 11.1, the amendment to the human rights code, which, in my view, continues to be a scar on the human rights code in this province. It is unique in the country. It is discriminatory itself, and only in this province do we have it. That came as a result of folks over there in the Progressive Conservative Party listening to their more extreme factions.

Then right on the eve of the 2012 election we had a debate over whether or not our Education Act could possibly be so offensive

to Albertans as to include reference to the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms in its preamble. On the eve of the election the Progressive Conservative government said: "Oh, that's outrageous that anyone would object to that. Of course we're going to put that in." The Wildrose said, "No, we shouldn't do that." Interestingly, after the election the Progressive Conservative government succumbed to the Wildrose, again, those extreme arguments, and agreed: "No. It might be a little offensive to have people in our education system ever feel that they might be needing to follow the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms."

Now we have this. We have this attempt to eliminate section 3(1)(b). Now, I will acknowledge that this section is not without its complexities, that it is not without some difficulties in terms of its interpretation and in terms of its implementation. That may well be true. But the way to deal with that is not to simply sever it and arbitrarily move forward with, I would suggest, empty rationalizations that all of this can be taken care of by the Criminal Code of Canada. Be clear, my friends: it cannot be taken care of by the Criminal Code of Canada.

It's interesting. The classic example of how this section has been potentially less than effective is the Lund case, which the Justice minister referred to. I found it particularly interesting because people got so involved in that case because of what I would argue were the very extreme opinions put forward on it by Ezra Levant. I've got to say, folks: choose your friends wisely, man. I just don't know that that's who needs to be driving your public policy decisions. That being said, he has every right to say what he does say, as do we all, but there is a limit on every right. Interestingly, when the Harper government chose to eliminate section 13 from the Canadian Human Rights Act, the Canadian Bar Association came out and said exactly that. You know what? Every right is only meaningful to the extent that it is limited in the appropriate circumstances, and no right in our country is absolute. Indeed, that is what the Supreme Court of Canada has said about the right to free speech. Again, it is important but not to the extent that it infringes on someone else's ability to feel safe or secure. That's what this legislation is geared to achieving.

Let's talk a little bit about whether the removal of this section could be ameliorated by the existence of the hate crime provisions in the Criminal Code of Canada. First of all, no, because the standard that somebody who is the subject of hate speech needs to meet under the Criminal Code of Canada is much higher than the standard that someone who is the victim of hate speech needs to meet through the human rights code or the Human Rights Commission.

Secondly, the Criminal Code of Canada has a very specific remedy, and there's not a lot of discretion in it. You convict someone of a crime, you come down on their head like a big hammer, and that's it, whereas the Human Rights Commission, if it's properly funded, if it's respected by the government that administers its legislation, which is a whole other issue in this province – nonetheless, if that is done, then the commission has the capacity and the discretion to engage in restorative justice, in mediation, in efforts to work through those problems that often exist, what is most often just a lack of understanding between two different minority groups within our society and within our communities. So that's another reason.

A third reason why the Criminal Code of Canada won't work is because that particular mechanism, frankly, my friends, is much, much less accessible. It is something that is engaged upon at the discretion of the police, not by the victim of the hate speech. Again, it doesn't work for that reason.

Finally, the Calgary police themselves report that, in their estimation, they only hear about 34 per cent of hate crimes and

hate speech offences. That's what they're hearing about, so is that really the place to go? Are they going to have the time and the resources and the effort to do the work that is necessary to grow inclusion, to grow acceptance, to grow mutual understanding in our province? No. That is not the job of the police, and it is not the job of the Criminal Code of Canada. It is something that should be happening through our human rights code, and that's why our human rights code needs to continue to be respected and why this provision needs to remain inside our human rights code.

Now, in December 2012 Racism Free Edmonton held public consultations on these issues, and they reached out to people from different minority communities, a broad range of different minority communities. I had this wonderful list of the organizations that are represented here in the galleries today, and, of course, being who I am, I have misplaced it in a pile, which is irritating to me because I wanted to read them out because they are so diverse. They represent ethnic minorities. They represent sexual orientation minorities. They represent gendered minorities. They represent income minorities. They represent a broad range of minorities. Those folks came together, and they concluded that section 3 in our human rights code continues to serve a very, very important purpose in our province and that its removal will result in more discrimination, more discriminatory acts, and fewer opportunities to resolve those issues. That's what they've said, and I think we should listen to them.

5:40

That is another point that I've come to here. Here we have a motion by the Official Opposition, who think they might get enough support from their right-wing-leaning pals over, you know, in the family. Let's face it. It's all a big family between those two. They think they might get enough for this, and then suddenly, boom, if that happens and the government acts on it, we're just going to eliminate that section of the human rights code.

Now, the fact of the matter is that even though this is a complex issue and even though it's never easy to balance two rights under our Charter and under our Constitution, where you start that process is by consulting heavily with the interested parties to this. We need to bring in members of all of these community groups on all sides, not even those who are the victims but also sometimes the perpetrators, and that hasn't been done . . .

The Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadowlark.

Dr. Sherman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to oppose Motion 502 for a number of reasons. I agree with many of the points that the hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona has brought up. We are a country of immigrants, people from all over the world, who came to this new land in search of freedom and opportunities to escape places where life wasn't just and fair.

In coming to this new land, I'd like to offer the other members a perspective of somebody who wasn't born here. Mr. Speaker, it wasn't that nice coming here in the '70s. Yes, I loved the snow, and I loved the mountains, and I loved the lakes and rivers in British Columbia. My mother had all of her children get a black eye the first week they came to this country. Many people, new immigrants can experience violence, hatred – as a child five kids beat me up – because of the colour of their skin, because they look different.

Mr. Speaker, I have to tell you that the physical violence was actually okay. It was the words. These words may be unparliamentary, but they need to be heard. I've been called a

Paki, a Hindu, carpet-rider, turban-twister. "We don't like your kind here. Go back to where you came from." Those were the words that hurt the most. They hurt. My parents came to this country to make a better place for their children. We grew up in a war zone, in what today we call the developing world, then a third-world country. Frankly, we actually felt safer in the war zone than we did in the town that I came to. I felt ashamed of who I was. I was ashamed of the colour of my skin. I was ashamed of the culture that I came from. I became a Christian in high school, and I went to a Baptist camp in Caroline, Alberta. The KKK were burning crosses in town. I came to this wonderful province. Some people wanted complete freedom, and they were burning crosses in town.

Mr. Speaker, this is about leadership. Premier Lougheed recognized that this country was changing and recognized that it's the duty of the majority to protect the new minority, to build a just and fair society. In fact, Laurence Decore fought hard with Prime Minister Trudeau to make this a multicultural country, not just bilingual but multilingual, multicultural. A humble man from Vegreville, one of the greatest leaders this country has had. Premier Lougheed recognized it and put these protections in. Premier Klein recognized it and actually strengthened them even more.

What causes me concern are the two leaders here. Well, out of the four leaders here you've got two conservative parties here, and this is where we fundamentally differ. You've got the Premier right here, who is a human rights lawyer and issued a directive to her Justice minister – and her current Justice minister agrees with the directive – which is to review or repeal this section of the human rights legislation. This Premier actually put this into a letter to the former Justice minister instructing him to repeal section 3 or review it with intent. This government caucus will actually be divided on this issue, Mr. Speaker, but the real issue is: where does our Premier stand, and where does the next leader, the one looking to be the Premier, stand? The Premier and I differ on this fundamentally, and half of her caucus, or many members of her caucus, will disagree with their own leader on this issue.

Mr. Speaker, for those who come here from across the world, we want to protect freedoms, absolutely. This is why those people escaped. Whether you're German or Ukrainian or Japanese or Chinese or Indian or African or South American or European or Polish, you come to escape, to protect these freedoms, and these freedoms come with responsibility, responsibility to not promote hatred or contempt. This section says: hey, don't expose people or a class of people to hatred or contempt. Why would we remove this, dear members of the Assembly? Why would we remove a section that says, "don't expose people to hatred or contempt"? Also, we must be allowed to walk freely along this country, yes. There's violence and there's hatred, yes, but we must be allowed to walk freely without being called bad names and horrible names that promote hatred and contempt.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona and the police chief are right. Most people here who get discriminated against, who get beaten up already don't complain despite the protections that are already there. They already don't. My dad always used to say: "Don't say anything. This isn't our country. This isn't our country. Just lay low. Be quiet." Mr. Speaker, I gave up my citizenship in the country of my origin, and I became a Canadian. I said: this is my country as much as it is anybody else's country.

Mr. Speaker, you were there in caucus when I walked out of caucus when I was a member of government. You and the Deputy Speaker came out, and you dragged me back. Yeah, that rumour that one MLA walked out of that room: that was me. Mr. Speaker, you dragged me back in, and thank you, because we filibustered

caucus for a month and we did not let it come to the floor of the Leg. But it is above the floor of the Leg. It is here. We need to talk about other things, other than this.

Mr. Speaker, you know, in Alberta the province used the notwithstanding clause to punish a teacher who had a certain sexual orientation. We've got to protect those – you can't hurt people and treat them unfairly because they're skinny or fat or tall or short or coloured or not coloured, men or women, their sexual orientation, their sexual preference. This is a debate we ought not to have, but now that it's here, I urge every member of the Legislature to vote against this.

5:50

Dear members from the Wildrose, I can understand – I can understand – your feeling. Even the Justice minister: yes, we do want to protect these freedoms. But these aren't cases where – we're pretty free to say a lot of things in this country. We are. We're pretty free to say a lot of stuff here, but for a handful of people who go above and beyond to make a point so other people can get physically or emotionally injured or hurt, you know, it doesn't make sense. This isn't a Liberal issue and it's not a Conservative issue; it's a human issue, Mr. Speaker.

I have so much more to say, but I'll leave this really short. Every Member of this Legislative Assembly, please, I urge you to vote against this. In fact, I would say that all of those who aren't coloured in this Assembly, who aren't visibly different – you know what, I'm not even going to stand up and vote on this, Mr. Speaker. I think everyone else who isn't a visible minority should be the ones standing up fighting for this. Everyone knows where I stand.

Thank you.

Mr. Anderson: Mr. Speaker, I'd like to thank the Liberal opposition leader for his stirring words, and I do have the highest respect for him and sorrow for what he experienced as a child growing up. There's no excuse for that in our Alberta.

I only have literally two minutes, but I will say this: my adopted sister, Jián Ài, is from China. She's Chinese-Canadian. Nothing makes my skin crawl more than racist comments and hurtful comments. I also grew up as part of not a visible minority but a religious minority group, and I can tell you that as many others have experienced deplorable, awful things said about their religion. It is a small minority, of course, thankfully, for where we live, but it is very hurtful. I remember, many times, tears shed in that regard. And I'm sure many people have that experience in here.

I don't feel that's what this amendment is for. This amendment does not change what hate speech is in the Criminal Code. It does not change our human rights legislation to do anything that would take away a person's right to be employed, a person's right to housing. All of those things that are rightfully protected under human rights legislation stay protected. All this does is make sure that if a religious leader or a media person or someone gets up and says something that might be controversial, maybe even something terrible that shouldn't be said, the best thing we can do is not haul them in front of a judge, in front of an appointed noncriminal court; the best thing we can do is expose those individuals for the hate-mongers that they are in the public opinion.

That's the way I think you deal with prejudicial speech, with discriminatory speech. You do not try to crush it; you expose it, and you hold those people accountable in the court of public opinion.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Thank you.

The hon. Minister of Justice and Solicitor General.

Mr. Denis: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We began at this a little late. I believe it was at 5:08. I would request unanimous consent of the House to continue debate past 6 until 6:08, till the Member for Lac La Biche-St. Paul-Two Hills can make his conclusion.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Justice has requested that the House go beyond the normal adjournment hour of 6 p.m., to allow sufficient time for this motion to be debated in its full extent, which is 55 minutes, following which five minutes would then be given to the mover to wrap up debate on the motion.

Is that your request, hon. Minister of Justice?

Mr. Denis: Yes, sir.

The Speaker: Yes?

We have a point of clarification requested by Airdrie.

Mr. Anderson: Does it not go with five minutes remaining to the Member for Lac La Biche-St. Paul-Two Hills for closing of the debate regardless? I believe it does.

The Speaker: Hon. member, the point here is that I have a list of speakers here who still wish to speak, and if we hit 6:00, automatically we adjourn, as you know. But this is a request to allow another eight minutes of debate by whomever and then five more minutes at the end of that to allow Lac La Biche-St. Paul-Two Hills to conclude debate.

Is that sufficiently clear, hon. members? Are you ready for the question?

[Unanimous consent granted]

The Speaker: We will continue on until 6:08, and at that point I will recognize Lac La Biche-St. Paul-Two Hills to close debate.

I now have the hon. Associate Minister of International and Intergovernmental Relations, followed by Edmonton-Centre. Please keep the clock in mind, hon. members.

Ms Woo-Paw: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is my honour to rise today to speak to Motion 502, and I'll try to be succinct. I'd just like to go straight to raising two issues in particular in consideration of the proposed motion. First is the argument that the criminal justice system is the capable and appropriate mechanism for addressing issues of hate and human rights issues. I believe that the Alberta Human Rights Commission serves an important role that cannot be substituted by the criminal justice system at the current time.

I'd like to quote a paper issued by the Ethno-Cultural Council of Calgary. The Criminal Code, while legislating against hate crimes, "offers no recourse for hate incidents," or events, which can be clearly hateful but may "not meet the threshold of a criminal offence."

The Alberta Human Rights Commission, by allowing those who have been subjected to hate speech to have their grievances heard, therefore plays a social role in the community that's much different than a formal court system. It is remedial and offers an opportunity for those on the receiving end of hateful incidents to seek recourse and justice.

As the ECCC argues, "The removal of section 3 from the AHRA would serve as the mechanism to silence victims of discrimination and hate." As noted in reports such as the national action committee on access to justice, there are profound systemic and societal barriers to accessing the criminal justice system. The

high cost of accessing the justice system is prohibitive. The nature of hate crimes themselves serve as a barrier to reporting. Calgary Police Service has stated that only 34 per cent of hate crimes are reported to police.

Hate speech uses fear and shame to victimize and intimidate individuals and communities who are already vulnerable. As an example, a graffiti message describing groups in derogatory ways and for them to go home is aimed at reinforcing an outsider status, that they don't belong. Many immigrants in ethnocultural communities already experience those emotions. As marginalized communities they may not feel empowered to voice concerns over these kinds of comments, let alone pursue costly legal actions. Relying exclusively on the criminal justice system necessarily means the exclusion of the same groups and communities who are most vulnerable to hate speech in the first place.

Mr. Speaker, the sense of rejection and exclusion that these types of statements seal on those of Canadian origin, especially the youth, create deep and long-lasting harm and negatively impact their sense of trust, belonging, and engagement with institutions and society as a whole. This is why quasi-judicial institutions like the Alberta Human Rights Commission, which is available and accessible to all Albertans, are so important.

As Albertans we all agree that the views expressed through hate speech are reprehensible, but some argue that the hurt feelings or offences that such speech causes should not lead to the curtailment of the individual right to freedom of speech for everybody else. Mr. Speaker, from the experience and lived experience of the impacted groups, the speech that exposes a person to discrimination, hatred, or contempt causes real harm.

When we discuss hate speech, we also need to understand and recognize that power is not equally shared in our society, that certain groups continue to have more power than others, that men continue to make more money than women, that people of colour are at greater risk of discrimination, that members of the LGBTQ communities are more likely to be victims of violence than straight people, and that people with disabilities face greater barriers to employment than those without disabilities. In the end, hate speech goes much farther than causing hurt feelings for an individual. Hate speech serves to further marginalize and silence groups who are already marginalized and leads to conditions where hatred and violence against minority groups are acceptable.

I'm not going to quote the Supreme Court decision in 2013, but I would like to end by saying that, Mr. Speaker, it is, at the very least, disconcerting if the members' argument is actually suggesting that people should be allowed to do the things that section 3(1)(b) prohibits.

I will not be supporting Motion 502, because section 3 of the Alberta Human Rights Act has built-in protection that prevents the section from being abused or overused or misused, and those protections and limitations also exist in very similar wording in four other Canadian jurisdictions.

6:00

Mr. Speaker, I would like to conclude by quoting from the ECC's position paper on this subject. Legislation like the AHRA and the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms "set Canada apart from other countries. They remind us that social inclusion and a celebration of diversity is not an inevitability, rather it [is] something we need to strive towards – something we need to protect."

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Thank you.

Hon. members, the request for unanimous consent, the explanation, the clarification took two minutes. That's not part of the debate. So the clock will stop at 6:10, and then we'll go to the Member for Lac La Biche-St. Paul-Two Hills to wrap up.

In the meantime, let's go to Edmonton-Centre, please.

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. This is an important discussion, and I'm glad we're having it. I think it allows us to reaffirm those things that make us distinct as Canadians and distinct as Albertans, and that is our commitment to human rights. I've always believed that it is integral to us to protect the minorities from the tyranny of the majority, and while a piece of legislation or human rights code is really just a piece of paper – I mean, standing in a parking lot, if somebody is going to thump you, a paper is not going to help you very much except in that it's a concept, it's a legal shield, and it certainly gives everyone the opportunity and access to the legal tools that allow you to go to the commission and seek redress for what has happened. That is very important.

Now, I've read a number of different papers that have been written on this. This was a struggle for me. As a social activist the freedom of speech is very important. Why it's so important to me in this House is because I wouldn't have been able to push a number of the policy issues that are so important to me and a number of the freedoms of the groups that I represent, which are so important to me, if I didn't have freedom of speech, particularly in this House, where I've been able to stand up and, as you know, for many years talk about the people that I represent in Edmonton-Centre, seniors and members of the queer community and women. How many times have I represented and stood up for women's issues here in Alberta? That free speech has allowed me to do that.

Ultimately, to me, it's a harms test. I look at a harms test and say: "Okay. Your right to swing your fist around in your free expression ends at the end of my nose." In the same way, freedom of expression has to have a reasonable limit. In other words, it ends at the nose of protection of human rights and protection of those people that need it today. Now, we may well come back here in 50 years – and I'll be delighted if I'm able to come back in 50 years – and maybe we will have reached a point in our society where that's not needed, but that is not where we are today. Therefore, that prohibition against discrimination – in other words, that protection of the groups that are named in the human rights and in our Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms – is integral to moving forward and creating the Alberta and the Canada that we all want. We want to welcome people here. We want people to feel that there is a protection and a welcome for them and that they can move forward in their lives. I want to see that in my city, in my fabulous constituency of Edmonton-Centre, in my province, and in my country. So, clearly, I don't support the motion that has been brought forward.

Once again, I refer back to the people I represent. They are my bosses. No hard feelings, but the caucus is not my boss; the government is not my boss. Even the Speaker sometimes is not my boss. My bosses are the people that elected me, and I am here to represent them. I love the diversity of my fabulous constituency of Edmonton-Centre, and I'm going to stand up for it because I think that what's being considered here is a great idea but is not the Edmonton, the Alberta, and the Canada that I want to see, and it is not acceptable now.

I thank you for the discussion, which allowed so many of us to put – you know, it's a head-and-heart argument, this one. For me, it's my heart, and I'm going with my heart in the protection of those people that I want to have around me as I move forward in life.

Thank you very much.

The Speaker: Are there others? The hon. Minister of Infrastructure I have next.

Mr. McIver: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have to say that I stand up here knowing that no matter which way I go on this, I'm going to feel like I'm wrong, but it's my duty in here to say what's on my mind and to try to do the best thing for Albertans. Actually, I'm quite surprised to hear myself agreeing with people that I normally don't agree with on much: the Member for Airdrie, the Member for Lac La Biche-St. Paul-Two Hills, and some of what the Member for Edmonton-Centre said.

I will say this. There are two principles that are very important here: the protection against discrimination of those that can be identified. Whether it's colour, race, religion, or sexual orientation, it's not acceptable. The other thing we need to remember is that every November 11 and every day of the year we ought to remember that those people fought for freedom of speech. Neither should be taken lightly.

I'm going to support this. I'm going to do it with some trepidation. I think it's the more right thing to do, but I have to tell you that this is not easy. I'm going to be quick because I think somebody else wants to say something, too.

The Speaker: Hon. Minister of Aboriginal Relations, you had a spot on the list which was ceded to someone else. Then we have Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview. It's getting a little bit confusing with all the notes coming and going, so I'm just going in the order as best I can.

Mr. Oberle: Okay. Very Quickly. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I agree with the hon. Member for Lac La Biche-St. Paul-Two Hills, that we have a right and a very important right of freedom to disagree, but we don't have a freedom to harm. Sometimes rights collide and clash, and we have to recognize that we're talking about a right to harm here, which I don't think we have. We know that speech harms. If it didn't, then this Legislature and Legislatures around the world have wasted a lot of time talking about bullying in the last little while. We know the harm that bullying can do. It causes suicides; it's awful.

My parents chose this country for a reason. My parents along with so many other immigrants left places where it was okay to discriminate, it was okay to single out, and it was okay to do harm. They chose Canada. Now, if Canada has been aggressive on human rights, maybe that's why, because so many of them came here escaping systems of persecution.

Mr. Speaker, this is a province where I want to raise my children and want them to raise their children. Just as I want that for my children, my grandchildren, I want this place to be open and welcoming and accepting of newcomers. Most of all, I want it to be home to them.

I'll stop my comments there.

The Speaker: Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview, you have about 30 seconds.

Mr. Bilous: Thanks, Mr. Speaker. I rise to speak. I'm opposed to this motion for a myriad of reasons, and I'm going to try to rattle off our guests that are here from around the province who are also opposed to this motion: the Ethno-Cultural Council of Calgary; Possibilities in Motion Foundation; Disabilities Action Hall; Men Action Network Calgary; Vietnamese youth group; the Women's Centre; the Women's Centre, Cambodian community; Chilean Canadian Community Association; Faculty of Social Work; HIV

link; Our Nation on Mission Society; Edmonton Multicultural Coalition; Filipino Retirees' Association; the Aboriginal community; and many other organizations.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Thank you.

I hesitate to rise and interrupt, but the time for the debate has elapsed.

Hon. Member for Lac La Biche-St. Paul-Two Hills, you have five minutes as the sponsor of the motion to conclude debate.

6:10

Mr. Saskiw: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. At this point I would like to request unanimous consent for one-minute bells.

[Unanimous consent denied]

Mr. Saskiw: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Thank you to everyone today for all of their arguments. I'd like to thank the Minister of Justice, Airdrie, and the Minister of Infrastructure for their arguments in support of this motion, but I'd also like to very much thank the others who were opposed to it, who made very passionate speeches in advocacy for their argument.

In particular, I'd like to thank the leader of the Liberal opposition for being exceptionally passionate. What happened to you and your family is disgusting and appalling. Those, however, are examples of what I believe are hate crimes that should be covered by the Criminal Code, where there is real punishment and jail time that ensues if someone goes that far.

I'd like to address one of the last comments about harm. There are limits to free speech. If there is harm incurred, there are all sorts of laws in Canada that deal with that. There's libel and defamation. If it goes into the realm of being a hate crime, it's the Criminal Code. This motion has nothing to do with speech that causes harm. It's about free speech in Alberta, to have the right to offend another person without being prosecuted.

Of course, one also has to look at the opposite side, where if someone is accused of these provisions, they have no right to a lawyer. They have no right to even know their accuser. There are no rules of evidence that apply, and there are no costs that are applied if the person is found to be innocent, even if it's found that the claim was vexatious and frivolous.

Mr. Speaker, we have seen cases where individuals have been found innocent and have been exonerated but after years and years of going through the process and after hundreds, tens of thousands, and even up to a hundred thousand dollars in legal costs. I believe that those types of serious cases should be before the courts, that there should be the full judicial process, and that if those people are found guilty, they should be punished to the fullest extent of the law rather than going through this other process.

I believe it's for these reasons that the Premier, the Minister of Justice, as well as the Justice critic for the Liberal Party agree with

my position. It's because we have a fundamental agreement that in a free, fair, and democratic society, you have the right to state your opinion and you have the right to say your belief without being prosecuted by a state-sanctioned commission.

Mr. Speaker, I would just close by saying that the federal government has repealed section 13 of the Canadian Human Rights Act. If we as a Legislature repeal section 3(1)(b) of the Alberta Human Rights Act, we would be the freest province in the freest country in the world.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Hon. members, that concludes debate on Motion 502, brought forward by the Member for Lac La Biche-St. Paul-Two Hills.

[The voice vote indicated that Motion Other than Government Motion 502 lost.]

[Several members rose calling for a division. The division bell was rung at 6:14 p.m.]

[Ten minutes having elapsed, the Assembly divided]

[The Speaker in the chair]

For the motion:

Anderson	Denis	Saskiw
Barnes	Donovan	Wilson
Bikman	McAllister	

Against the motion:

Amery	Horner	Quest
Bhardwaj	Jeneroux	Rodney
Bilous	Johnson, L.	Rogers
Blakeman	Khan	Sandhu
Brown	Klimchuk	Sarich
Casey	Kubinec	Sherman
Cusanelli	Lemke	Starke
DeLong	Leskiw	Swann
Dorward	Luan	VanderBurg
Fenske	McIver	Woo-Paw
Fritz	Notley	Xiao
Griffiths	Oberle	Young
Hancock	Olesen	

Totals:	For – 8	Against – 38
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[Motion Other than Government Motion 502 lost]

The Speaker: May I just remind you that the Legislative Policy Committee on Resource Stewardship will convene this evening at 7 in committee room A to consider the main estimates for the Ministry of Aboriginal Relations. Accordingly, the House now stands adjourned until 1:30 tomorrow afternoon.

[The Assembly adjourned at 6:27 p.m. to Tuesday at 1:30 p.m.]

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