



Province of Alberta

The 29th Legislature
Second Session

Alberta Hansard

Wednesday afternoon, May 4, 2016

Day 22

The Honourable Robert E. Wanner, Speaker

Legislative Assembly of Alberta
The 29th Legislature

Second Session

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Legislative Assembly of Alberta

1:30 p.m.

Wednesday, May 4, 2016

[The Speaker in the chair]

Prayers

The Speaker: Please bow your heads.

Let us reflect, each in our own way. As we sit in this Chamber today, we know that our fellow Albertans from Fort McMurray and Wood Buffalo are victims of one of the most devastating natural disasters in our history. We know that their lives will remain ever changed as a result of this disaster. Two of our own fellow members are victims of this event, one of whom has lost his home and a lifetime of memories with it. Let each of us demonstrate through our words and actions that compassion is the critical element of leadership. Let us also remind ourselves that this Earth we live upon is more powerful than we are.

Please be seated.

Introduction of Guests

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Rimbey-Rocky Mountain House-Sundre.

Mr. Nixon: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to rise today to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly three special grade 6 classes from the constituency of Rimbey-Rocky Mountain House-Sundre. The three classes are from River Valley elementary school in Sundre. That actually is the school that my children attend, both the ones that have graduated and the ones that are still in school, so I'm excited to welcome them to the Assembly today. I would ask that Mr. Walton's, Ms Tarnoczi's, and Ms Cheung's classes all stand in the Assembly. They have a list of a lot of chaperones that are with them today. I know I will not try your patience by trying to name all of them; it is quite a list. Many of them are friends and neighbours. Instead, I will just ask that all of my colleagues give them the traditional warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: Welcome.

Are there any other school groups today for introductions?

Hearing none, the Minister of Economic Development and Trade.

Mr. Bilous: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to rise and introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly members of the Learning Centre Literacy Association, who are joining us today in the members' gallery. Jawda Tobak, Pat Sharun, Angeliki Gkournelou, Alyssa McPhail, Denis Lapierre, Sarah Robinson, and Nikolaos Lazos work at the Abbottsfield mall offering free programs for adults in Edmonton who want to improve their reading, writing, math, and computer skills. Together they remind us that in Alberta we want everyone to reach their full potential and have opportunities to give back to their neighbourhoods and hometowns. I'd ask my guests to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: Welcome.

Are there any other guests for introduction today? The hon. Minister of Environment and Parks.

Ms Phillips: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to introduce to you and through you an old friend, Dr. Thomas Marois, who is now

a senior lecturer in development studies at the University of London. However, his BA and his MA were earned at the University of Alberta, and certainly his undergraduate years were spent hanging around with the minister of environment, drinking beer at the Power Plant. I ask him, my old friend of 20 years, to rise and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

The Speaker: Welcome.

Ministerial Statements

The Speaker: The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I would like to seek unanimous consent from the Assembly that following the responses to ministerial statements the House stands adjourned until 1:30 p.m. tomorrow.

[Unanimous consent granted]

The Speaker: The Minister of Municipal Affairs.

Fort McMurray Wildfire

Ms Larivee: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Hon. members, I rise today with a heavy heart to provide this House with an update on the wildfire that has devastated the community of Fort McMurray. To all the residents of Fort McMurray: I want to say clearly that all Albertans are behind you, I believe all Canadians are behind you, and certainly this government is behind you.

As a colleague and fellow Albertan I think I can speak for all of us in this House when I say that our thoughts and hearts are with the Member for Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo and, of course, the Leader of Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition, the Member for Fort McMurray-Conklin. As someone who, unfortunately, knows firsthand how hard and scary it is to leave behind your home and your community, my heart rests so deeply with all of those from Fort McMurray in these early days and will continue to do so in the many days, weeks, months, and years to come.

Please know that we continue to do absolutely everything we can to keep Albertans safe and to stop this fire. I want to thank the incredibly dedicated front-line emergency responders, who are working under tremendously difficult circumstances to ensure everybody's safety and to suppress the fire. I want to thank Albertans for the tremendous outpouring of support, including the continued donations to the Canadian Red Cross, the sharing of firefighting resources from across the province, and our industry partners who are both sharing firefighting resources and also providing places for many of the evacuees to stay.

With that said, I will now provide an update on the current status of the situation in Fort McMurray. Our focus at this time remains centred on ensuring the safety of people, that the residents of Fort McMurray have safely evacuated the area and are able to find secure lodging with friends or family at one of the reception centres or in the home of one of the many individual Albertans who have opened their doors at this time of crisis. Also, we are focused on ensuring the safety of the first responders who have made that choice and commitment to stay there and to deal with the difficulty that they are enduring.

All of the urban Fort McMurray area continues to be under a mandatory evacuation. Upwards of 80,000 people are affected. Reception centres have been set up at Noralta Lodge, Anzac Recreation Centre, Lac La Biche, Fort MacKay, and Northlands recreation centre. As I rise in this House, thousands of evacuees are heading to Edmonton, where we are working with partners to

establish reception centres in the city. I implore all Albertans who are displaced by the fire to register with evacuation centres so local authorities can ensure that everyone is accounted for and safe. Evacuees can call 1.888.350.6070 to register.

I am tremendously thankful that there have been no casualties and only a few minor injuries reported so far.

Mr. Speaker, emergencies of this magnitude require co-ordination between many levels of government and community partnerships. The response has been what we expect from Albertans, wholehearted and strong. But we are still in the throes of an intense crisis, and our fire crews are working around the clock to reduce the threat of fire to people, homes, and infrastructure.

The fire conditions today, unfortunately, remain extremely challenging. Our government is working closely with the regional municipality of Wood Buffalo to ensure the evacuation of homes and neighbourhoods is orderly and safe. The fire is actively burning in residential areas in Fort McMurray, with significant structural loss. At this time we estimate that around 1,600 homes have been lost. I know that the Leader of the Opposition is one of those affected, and my thoughts are with him and his family, as they are with every person who has been evacuated.

1:40

As devastating as this fire has been already, we must prepare ourselves for more bad news in the hours and days ahead. This fire is unrelenting, and firefighters are facing extreme fire conditions and rapidly changing fire behaviour this afternoon. The fire situation remains dynamic and current temperatures and wind present extreme conditions. Since the fire began, every single resource that needed to be at this fire has been there and will continue to be there. With 88 firefighters from regions around the province joining the fight overnight, there are approximately 250 firefighters currently battling this fire. We also have 12 pieces of heavy equipment and 12 helicopters engaging in suppression efforts at the Fort McMurray fire. There are currently two air tanker groups and nine air tankers in the air, although this number changes hourly as our firefighters adjust to conditions. We are currently utilizing as many aircraft as is logistically possible and safe to fight this fire.

Crossgovernment efforts are being closely co-ordinated out of the Alberta Emergency Management Agency Provincial Operations Centre, and ministries are supporting emergency response efforts and addressing the needs of evacuated residents in a number of ways. Alberta Agriculture and Forestry is supporting ongoing fire-suppression efforts. Alberta Environment and Parks is providing support to evacuees that have gone to provincial campgrounds, and they are waiving the fees for them. Alberta Health and Alberta Health Services are providing medical support to evacuees who are presenting to reception centres. All patients at the Northern Lights regional health centre were safely evacuated and are being transferred to appropriate health care facilities. All evacuated acute-care patients and continuing care clients will be flown to health care facilities in the Edmonton zone, where they will receive the care that they need. Alberta Human Services emergency social services are co-ordinating support to respond to the needs of evacuees and are resourcing the staff for reception centres. Alberta Transportation is monitoring road and visibility conditions and supporting traffic management where required.

Mr. Speaker, our government has also called in the support of our federal government through the Department of National Defence, and they stand at the ready to offer any logistical support we need. They have already dispatched helicopters to provide logistical support in the region.

As well, multiple communities across northern and central Alberta are dispatching structural firefighting equipment and assets

to the region, including, I'm proud to say, a sprinkler trailer from Slave Lake. Industry partners have offered the use of work camps to house evacuees, and Fort McMurray First Nation, Gregoire First Nation, and Fort McKay First Nation have all opened their doors to evacuees.

I'm also pleased to confirm that our government has already approved emergency funding of \$2 million to the Red Cross to provide direct support to the evacuees. It is very important that evacuees sign into a reception centre or call the Red Cross to register. Doing so will greatly assist our ongoing efforts to account for evacuees and help ensure we are able to provide proper supports for evacuees going forward. Albertans want to help; that is our nature. We're encouraging anyone who wants to donate to the evacuation and relief efforts to please contact the Red Cross.

Please know that without doubt this government is fully committed to supporting the people and community of Fort McMurray now and in the months and years to come to respond to this threat today and in the days to come and to assist you to recover once it is safe again to return home.

As someone who has been through this, I want the people of Fort McMurray to know that I will be there with you, Albertans will be there with you, and we will all pull together in this time of need. All Albertans are behind you now when you are displaced from your homes, all Albertans will be there to help you rebuild, and as Albertans we will come together and see your recovery through.

Mr. Speaker, Albertans can be assured that we are all working together and we will do what it takes today, tomorrow, and in the weeks to come to rebuild and to persevere. That is the Alberta way.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Livingstone-Macleod.

Mr. Stier: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and good afternoon, all. Today I first want to thank the minister and the Premier for their work to keep all Albertans informed on the terrible fires that have struck Fort McMurray. I want to pass on my thanks from the Leader of the Official Opposition, the Member for Fort McMurray-Conklin, and the Member for Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo for the full co-operation from the government as they continue their work in Fort McMurray to help residents.

Our entire caucus remains dedicated to monitoring the situation and helping in any way that we can. I would like to echo comments made already today to all Albertans. The very best way to offer assistance at this time is through cash donations to the Red Cross. Mr. Speaker, words cannot express our feelings of total devastation. Like all Albertans, we watched horrified as the fires crossed into the city borders yesterday afternoon. This fire has torn up tens of thousands of families from their homes. The weight of the challenges ahead is extraordinary. I ask for all Albertans' thoughts and prayers to be with those whose lives have been forever changed. We ask for all Albertans to pass their thoughts and prayers on for the safety of all responders. We urge anyone still in the city to evacuate but stay safe.

Today's pain is a pain Albertans have too often experienced over the past several years. It was just three years ago when the banks of the rivers in southern Alberta burst, forcing many to evacuate their homes as they saw everything they owned submerge under the angry waters. Like many others in this House, I saw the anxiety, worry, and sadness this put on all those impacted. It's the same challenges we saw after the fires in Slave Lake in 2011.

But during these times of tremendous difficulties we also saw the spark of the character of Alberta. Alberta did not become the great province it is today without facing adversity. Our people are resilient, compassionate, and caring. Albertans have already shown this character in spades. Energy companies have opened their camps.

Homes from Lac La Biche to Bonnyville to here in Edmonton are already opening their doors. The people of Fort McMurray are a strong people. We know Albertans will band together. We know we will rebuild. It is that spirit that made our province the best place in the world.

As cowgirl poet Doris Daley once put it: “We knew drought and [we knew] fire and heartache, we knew fat and we knew bone. But we were silver lining people and we never rode alone.”

Thank you very much.

The Speaker: Thank you.

The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Mason: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I would seek the unanimous consent of the House to allow a representative of the third party as well as the two independent members to respond to the ministerial statement.

[Unanimous consent granted]

The Speaker: The member for the third party, Calgary-Hays.

1:50

Mr. McIver: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is my honour on behalf of our Progressive Conservative caucus to reply to the minister's address. Interestingly and perhaps fittingly, today is International Firefighters' Day. It is times like this that even in this competitive place we must put our differences aside and work together to make sure that government is doing all it can to help the victims of the fire.

The town of Slave Lake has literally risen from the ashes of a huge fire in 2011, the source of our Municipal Affairs minister. Municipalities across Alberta are largely but not completely recovered from the massive flooding in 2013. What is common through all of this, Mr. Speaker, is the Alberta can-do spirit of getting things done, working together, and helping one another in a time of great need.

In the last 24 hours we've heard devastating stories of the destruction caused by this fire. Thousands of people are affected by this disaster, including some hon. members of this Assembly who are personally impacted. On behalf of our caucus, our thoughts, prayers, and best wishes are with those members.

The brave residents of Fort McMurray, who on a moment's notice had to flee their homes, now have time to count not only their losses but the blessings of having no deaths reported so far from this tragic event. First responders are working around the clock to keep people safe from danger. Firefighters and rescue workers have left their own cities and communities, in many cases, to come and help the citizens of Fort McMurray and area. Albertans across the province right now are opening their homes and businesses to help evacuees. Residents have provided jerry cans of gasoline to help people stranded. Others are delivering water and food for people and for their pets. There are offers to keep livestock safe and to transport them to where they can be cared for until their farm and ranch homes are back online. In the days and weeks ahead there may be more challenges, but there will no doubt be more stories like these, highlighting the caring and generous nature of Albertans.

Mr. Speaker, we must also care for the unseen damage done. Some victims of the fire will bear invisible scars in the form of PTSD or mental stress. We must provide help for those losses as well.

Our thoughts and prayers are with everyone affected by the fires. We are deeply concerned with the well-being of those displaced from their homes, and we are proud and supportive of the great work done by everyone helping right now.

Mr. Speaker, several members of our caucus team have experience with previous Alberta major events, and we offer that experience should the government require it. Today all of us in this Legislature are on one team. Our PC caucus wishes the government only good results in caring for the people of Fort McMurray and surrounding area.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View.

Dr. Swann: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Well, on behalf of the Liberal caucus I want to thank the Premier and the Minister of Municipal Affairs for their words and their commitment to this great tragedy. Today all Albertans, all Canadians stand together with the people of Fort McMurray, including the many brave emergency workers who continue to labour on. The events unfolding in Fort McMurray are a profound tragedy, and it would seem that the only ray of sunshine through the smoke is that through these extraordinary efforts of the emergency management teams and EMS workers and the people of Fort McMurray, no one to date has had any fatalities.

My thoughts and prayers go out to all those who've lost so much and had to leave their homes behind with no certainty that there will be a home to return to. I'm certain that once the fire is out and the process of rebuilding begins, there will be much discussion about costs and what can be learned from this, our third major disaster in Alberta in five years.

Along with the physical and financial loss is unmeasurable emotional trauma, often more difficult and more lasting than the physical and financial recovery. I'm aware, too, that there's counselling available in the emergency reception centres, which I applaud. I know that the Health minister and the Premier are both committed to all the support that will be needed both now, when people are in shock and mourning, and a year from now, when the trauma and memories can still be overwhelming. I know I speak for all the members here when I say that the rebuilding of healthy lives is every bit as important as the rebuilding of homes and roads and schools.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Thank you.

The hon. Member for Calgary-Elbow.

Mr. Clark: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I had a difficult time writing this today. As we learn more about the tragic events unfolding in Fort McMurray, I've had a hard time keeping my focus, as I imagine all of us have. I'm especially thankful that so far no one has lost their life in this tragic event. I'm also thankful for the bravery – the tremendous bravery – of first responders as they run toward danger while others seek safety. And I'm thankful for but I'm not surprised by the outpouring of support from Albertans because that's who we are; that is who we are as Albertans.

Of course, it saddens me deeply to see the loss of so much property, so many memories, and so much of the city of Fort McMurray. I worry that the worst may in fact be yet to come. I hope everyone remains safe, in particular first responders from around Alberta and around the country.

Watching those shocking images of people fleeing the fires, having spent a lot of time working in Fort McMurray, I, of course, was struck by the devastation, watching family homes burn, watching familiar landmarks go up in smoke. I think of the Leader of the Official Opposition and his family, who lost their home, and I want him and all of his colleagues in the Wildrose caucus to know that my thoughts are with the Leader of the Official Opposition and his family. I offer my unconditional support to you, to him, to his

family, and to the Member for Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo as well.

I offer that same support to the government. I commend you for your swift response to the crisis and also your very good work keeping Albertans safe and keeping them informed.

Today our entire province in addition, of course, to this House stands united in support of our friends in and around Fort McMurray. Albertans are strong, but never are we stronger than in the face of a crisis. In times of crisis we put our differences aside here. I echo the sentiments of all of my colleagues. I offer my thoughts to the people in Fort McMurray and the hopes that everyone continues to be safe.

Now, I, too, have lived through a natural disaster. My most vivid memories are not of what was lost in the flood but of the tremendous outpouring of support from Albertans. I will never forget the images of hundreds of Edmonton police and firefighters streaming down highway 2, coming to help. I'll never forget the day

complete strangers showed up by the thousands to help. And I'll never forget the support of neighbours who abandoned their own homes to help others who they thought were worse off. That's who we are as Albertans. That's what we do in this province.

I want the people of Fort McMurray to know that we're there for you. We're there for you today, we'll be there for you tomorrow, and we will be there for you as long as you need us to be until the city of Fort McMurray is rebuilt. We are Albertans. Even in the face of overwhelming devastation, we are strong, and we are united.

Thank you.

The Speaker: Hon. members, the daily Routine is now concluded.

A legislative policy committee will convene this afternoon for consideration of the main estimates. Families and Communities will consider the estimates of Service Alberta in the Grassland Room.

[The Assembly adjourned at 1:59 p.m. pursuant to Standing Order 59.01(5)(b)]

Table of Contents

Prayers.....	803
Introduction of Guests.....	803
Ministerial Statements	
Fort McMurray Wildfire.....	803

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