



Province of Alberta

The 29th Legislature
Second Session

Alberta Hansard

Tuesday morning, May 24, 2016

Day 32

The Honourable Robert E. Wanner, Speaker

Legislative Assembly of Alberta The 29th Legislature

Second Session

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Ganley, Hon. Kathleen T., Calgary-Buffalo (ND)
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Starke, Dr. Richard, Vermilion-Lloydminster (PC),
Progressive Conservative Opposition House Leader
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Strankman, Rick, Drumheller-Stettler (W)
Sucha, Graham, Calgary-Shaw (ND)
Swann, Dr. David, Calgary-Mountain View (AL)
Taylor, Wes, Battle River-Wainwright (W)
Turner, Dr. A. Robert, Edmonton-Whitemud (ND)
van Dijken, Glenn, Barrhead-Morinville-Westlock (W)
Westhead, Cameron, Banff-Cochrane (ND),
Deputy Government Whip
Woollard, Denise, Edmonton-Mill Creek (ND)
Yao, Tany, Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo (W)

Party standings:

New Democrat: 54 Wildrose: 22 Progressive Conservative: 9 Alberta Liberal: 1 Alberta Party: 1

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Legislative Assembly of Alberta

10 a.m.

Tuesday, May 24, 2016

[The Speaker in the chair]

Prayers

The Speaker: Good morning.

Let us bow our heads and each in our own way reflect upon the profound strength our province and our nation has because of our cultural diversity. It is the diversity in our colour, faith, traditions, and languages that binds us together.

Please be seated.

Orders of the Day

Government Motions

Evening Sittings

16. Ms Ganley moved on behalf of Mr. Mason:
Be it resolved that pursuant to Standing Order 4(1), commencing May 24, 2016, the Assembly shall meet on Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday evenings for consideration of government business for the duration of the Second Session of the 29th Legislature 2016 spring sitting unless the Government House Leader notifies the Assembly that there shall be no evening sitting that day by providing notice under Notices of Motions in the daily Routine or at any time prior to 6 p.m.

[Government Motion 16 carried]

Government Bills and Orders

Second Reading

Bill 16

Traffic Safety Amendment Act, 2016

[Adjourned debate May 19: Mr. Mason]

The Speaker: Any members wishing to speak? The Member for Grande Prairie-Wapiti.

Mr. Drysdale: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure to be able to speak to this bill this morning. For the most part our caucus will be supportive of this bill. I mean, there's some good work in there, frankly, some of the stuff I started a few years ago – and I'm glad to see it getting finished now – mostly some pretty common-sense stuff, you know. It's good to see that the minister has taken a start at trying to address the Uber question and everything else.

So I'll encourage our members to vote in favour of this bill. Thanks for the time.

The Speaker: The Member for Barrhead-Morinville-Westlock.

Mr. van Dijken: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to speak to Bill 16, the Traffic Safety Amendment Act, 2016. It is always good to see Alberta Transportation take the initiative and do some housekeeping of their laws. While there is much housekeeping here, there is also something new, the legal framework to draft regulations for transportation network companies. I can understand the government wanting to make sure that proper insurance is in place for TNCs. If there is an accident, everyone wants to make sure that they are covered. Yet not every TNC driver is driving for the TNC one hundred per cent of the time.

I am pleased that new insurance products are being made available by industry and being approved by the superintendent of insurance, but I question the superintendent's decision to delay the approval of one TNC's insurance product until July 1, 2016. While one TNC had to stop operations, a new taxi service based on a TNC had their ducks in a row and launched, scooping up market share. It gives Albertans the perception, rightfully or wrongfully, that there was some jiggery-pokery going on.

I can also understand the requirement to go do a police information check. This is a more rigorous screening than a simple criminal records check, but it's a little harder to get. I'm not against that, but I'll note that there are a lot of criminal offences, and there is no clarity about what kinds of crimes and how recent they should be to disqualify people from driving others around. Still, we don't want criminals and those known to police as criminal elements driving the general public around.

The issue that bugs most Albertans, or many Albertans, about the TNC rules is the requirement for a class 1, 2, or 4 licence. Most Albertans have a class 5. Most Albertans don't want to be bothered and don't understand what all is involved with obtaining a class 4 licence. With additional training, licensing fees, road tests for an uncertain benefit, Mr. Speaker, this is what many of my colleagues call red tape. Many Albertans figure that if you have a class 5 and can drive a car or a pickup truck, you should be good to go whether or not someone else is in the car with you. Given that most TNC drivers are driving their own cars and are not doing it full-time, why bother with this red-tape barrier?

These minor points of law go completely against the sharing economy that has emerged thanks to social media technology. I would expect many backbench NDP members would also share these concerns. This is cutting-edge technology that needs to be embraced.

I wonder if some folks across the aisle have thought about who might be discriminated against with a class 4 requirement; in particular, women and rural Albertans. You may ask: why women? Well, today in Alberta only 12 per cent of the class 1, 2, and 4 licences are held by women, but they hold 51 per cent of the class 5 licences. Of course, they could get a class 4 licence, but when you are talking about a part-time way to make some extra cash with your own car, this barrier falls disproportionately on women.

You might also ask: why rural Albertans? Well, from here in the Legislature there are a number of places that I could go to get a class 4 test done, but accessing testing locations isn't nearly as convenient in rural Alberta. There is also a special need for part-time TNC drivers in rural Alberta because full-time taxi operations are hard to find, especially on a Friday or Saturday night, when the public safety value of them is at a premium.

I'll note, Mr. Speaker, that these points about insurance policies, information checks, and licence class are not written into this bill. They will not be statute. They will be written into the regulations. I suspect the regulations are drafted but cannot yet go to cabinet for approval. In Ottawa draft regulations get published and circulated for comment in the *Canada Gazette*, but does this happen with the *Alberta Gazette*?

I am also concerned that this TNC legislation will impact carpooling applications and parcel delivery. I don't want to regulate how people use technology to do something they already do without technology, nor do I want to regulate people picking up and dropping off things, a practice that people already do without technology but could easily be made more efficient by driving apps.

Many times in rural Alberta we need to get a parcel from the country to maybe a family member that's living several hundred kilometres away. With a car-sharing app, where we can look at finding someone that's already going to be going in that direction,

they can deliver a parcel for us. Need a parcel, a package, or something else dropped off? There's surely someone going where you want to get it, but you need the technology to match you up. Wouldn't everyone here rather an existing drive happen than a special courier or a hotshot? Without seeing the regulation, I don't know what the minister has up his sleeve, but the legislative framework is there.

10:10

There are some other provisions in this legislation that are good. If police pull you over and you produce your valid insurance pink card but the old expired insurance card is still in the folder, you will no longer be fined. That's just common sense.

Then we have some changes to the ignition interlock program and impaired driving laws. First-time offenders whose blood alcohol concentration is less than .160 currently can apply for an exemption to the ignition interlock program. First-time offenders won't get this exemption anymore with Bill 16. That is good.

Street racing causing bodily harm or death will now have a five-year licence disqualification, consistent with other Criminal Code provisions for driving causing bodily harm or death.

A loophole allowing a charged impaired driver to avoid escalating penalties if they appear in court on all charges at once is eliminated.

Novice drivers will now legally be able to be taken back to the police station and be administered the real breathalyzer, not just the roadside approved screening device.

A person in year 4 of 5 of a driving suspension who wants to start driving again under the ignition interlock program can now do so for the one year, not having to go through the full five-year program on top of the driving suspension.

Mr. Speaker, we would like to make Bill 16 better by adding some definitions to the law, definitions like what a transportation network company is. Unfortunately, one area that we cannot amend is the definition allowing a tow truck with lights flashing to be designated as an emergency vehicle. We cannot amend these sections of legislation at this time because those parts of the law did not come open. We hope the minister and his department will take these recommendations under advisement and bring them forward for round 3 of the update to the Traffic Safety Act.

I thank the minister for bringing this law forward, and I look forward to a productive debate on the bill. Thank you.

The Speaker: Are there any questions or observations under 29(2)(a) to the Member for Barrhead-Morinville-Westlock?

Seeing none, are there any other individuals who would like to speak to the bill? The hon. Member for Drumheller-Stettler.

Mr. Strankman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's truly an honour to talk about this Traffic Safety Amendment Act, 2016. In rural areas the ability to drive and be mobile in areas that require a mechanical means of transportation to be timely and efficient is important, but moreover, on that, the safety of those modes of transportation is also important. In the diverse constituency of Drumheller-Stettler, where we have expansive areas and where with modern transportation it requires upwards of almost three hours to get from one diagonal to the other in the constituency, it's important to be able to be mobile and have effective and safe transportation to do that.

On the surface this appears to be nothing more than housekeeping on the part of the government, and there are some elements of that within this proposed act. I was speaking to the members from Calgary-Shaw and Leduc-Beaumont prior to the beginning of this session, and we were talking about the housekeeping portion

regarding the spelling of the word "motorcycle." I know there's serious and onerous work to be done in this Chamber, but I guess we're relegated to that today on this fine day in Alberta, and I'm proud and happy to be here to do that. Wordsmithing, as you know, Mr. Speaker and members opposite and members on all sides, is important, and spelling within this legislation is a perfectly reasonable housekeeping item.

I'm pleased that some common-sense items such as the requirement to produce your pink slip for law officers have been included here. In a personal incident of yours truly, with some of the diverse locations of our farm vehicles, that situation has happened to me, and through the affableness of the police officer at the time in the rural areas there was not a penalty enforced. But he and I both knew that the proper effect of the law, the law in the province, is to produce a properly dated proof of insurance. There are some vehicles now inoperable on the farm that I know that have a series of those expired proofs of insurance in them because that was the easier way to do that. Mr. Speaker and members of the Chamber, this change to the act is common sense. In this day and age it seems that common sense is not common, but this is long overdue.

The government has also taken the time to fix a few items that fall into the realm of, should I call it, or could we call it, law and order. This is a particularly serious issue or portion of the discussion. Alcoholic drinking and driving is something that I doubt anyone here doesn't believe needs to be eliminated from our roads. Now, with the potential changes regarding other forms of impediments, I guess I could call it, to our mental capacities, whether they be some sorts of drugs, there are going to be different challenges to our legal system going forward. In the case of alcohol, drinking, the inducement of drugs, despite strides in the right direction in Alberta, the problem still persists.

The government has proposed several fixes to some sections of this act that needed clarity and fixing, and part of that clarity and fixing was a result of legal actions brought forward by, should I call it, finely perceptive lawyers in the court system. The major one I see is to finally close a loophole that allowed accused drunk drivers to appear in court on multiple charges. Mr. Speaker, in the rural area that I know of, there are cases like this, and it has occurred. The constabulary, the Queen's Cowboys, as some people know them, the RCMP in the rural areas, is very frustrated by this. Some of those people that are challenging the system do this to avoid escalating penalties. Getting off lightly simply by bundling your charges is something you do with phone, cable, or Internet services. It is not something that should be used to avoid stiffer penalties for something as serious as impaired driving.

To our Solicitor General from this province: possibly the imposition of stricter consecutive penalties could be a differentiation rather than simply trying to bring forward legislation. It's been effected in the federal arena, where times before probation and continuation of sentences are of greater effectiveness than simply effecting penalties. Mr. Speaker, I believe this will make our roads safer and, hopefully, keep habitual offenders off the streets and roads and highways of the great province of Alberta.

As I stated earlier, impaired driving is a very serious problem, and any common-sense steps designed to curb it are a good idea, in my opinion. I note that the change to the ignition interlock program is one of those changes. Impaired driving is a serious topic, and we should do whatever we can to change the public's view of it. Chances are that if you are pulled over for the first time, as a first-time offender it wasn't truly your first time driving while impaired; you just happened to finally get caught at it. As I mentioned earlier, Mr. Speaker and members of the Chamber, driving in Alberta and

driving in the rural constituencies is a privilege. The first-time convicted offender should want to regain this privilege when having to abide by the ignition interlock program. This is not an unreasonable request. If it helps to break established patterns of drinking and driving and saves lives in the process, to me it is a positive step forward.

10:20

Any loophole that we can close to keep impaired drivers off the streets and highways is a worthwhile endeavour. Technicalities such as the one eliminated in section 90(2) to ensure that a novice driver can now be asked to produce a breath sample at either or both the roadside and at the station are a welcome fix as well.

Although I've seen boots on the ground a lot longer than some of my colleagues across the aisle, street racing has been around since before my early days. As soon as someone developed a means to propel a tire, racing has existed. From James Dean to *The Fast and the Furious*, racing has been glamourized by Hollywood and in books. Sadly, it has also had tragic consequences, as both James Dean and Paul Walker found out with their violent deaths. In fact, Mr. Speaker, as recently as last night on my entry into the city I saw a police officer on the Anthony Henday off the highway 14 exchange that had two vehicles pulled over at once. I could only believe that that's what was going on, that there was some sort of a multiple vehicle occurrence there.

It is only just that street racers who cause bodily harm or death be punished with the same severity as other dangerous drivers under the Traffic Safety Act. Currently under the Traffic Safety Act such a conviction carries a five-year disqualification from driving. Street racing causing bodily harm or death, however, only carried in the past a one-year disqualification. This was a joke, and I'm pleased to see it being addressed.

Now, before the members opposite get complacent about my positive and sometimes witty, supposedly, in my view, prose – others would disagree – I must point out that this proposed legislation is far from perfect. The hon. Minister of Transportation missed a golden opportunity, in my view, while opening up this act, to address some concerns that were brought up not only in this House in my questions to him but in my personal meetings with him.

I speak of an issue that I first raised on November 2, 2015, and again in question period on November 16. The issue was concerning tow truck operation and the fact that they are not considered emergency vehicles under the Traffic Safety Act. Mr. Speaker, these drivers are at serious risk while recovering vehicles on busy roads and highways. It is not uncommon for the drivers to be the last ones at an accident or a recovery scene, long after the police and other emergency personnel have departed. I'm sure that many members opposite and on this side of the Chamber will understand that while the police are at the location recovering vehicles involved in an accident of any kind or simply distressed on the side of the road, people are respectful of the lighting and displays that the police provide. But they are only there for the immediate information gathering at the incident, and after they leave, the tow truck operators are generally left to fend for themselves.

In a personal situation, Mr. Speaker, again on highway 14, near the divided highway section, the tow truck operator came out to service a flat tire. They will not approach those situations without the gravity of two tow trucks for the simple physics that many people will pass them at high rates of speed while they're providing service at the side of the road and do not slow down. The 60 to 80 operators killed on North American roads every year are almost as likely to be killed on the job as law enforcement officers. This gives the industry one of the highest occupational death rates per capita.

My disappointment that the minister did not open this or have this be involved in this legislation stems from the minister's quote.

Safety is the first priority of our department. Far too many people are killed on our roads in a variety of ways. The hon. member has quite rightly brought forward some serious aspects to that, that deserve careful attention, and I want to assure the hon. member that it will get the attention that it deserves.

We want to make sure that our roads are as safe as possible.

The people that work on the roads, whether they're first responders or people operating tow trucks... or driving their family for a long weekend, deserve to have safe roads.

Now, I believe – and I've known the minister for some time in the Chamber and outside of the Chamber – that the minister was sincere when he spoke those words, and I am hopeful that he will go the extra mile to ensure that this oversight is dealt with in a reasonable and timely manner.

No one should lose their life while doing their job when a mechanism exists to prevent it. This government, Mr. Speaker, is very adamant that farm workers should have legislation that protects them. I have had direct conversations with members opposite, with the minister on this subject, as I've stated here, and his response is proof of that. Why are we not exhibiting that? What is the slippage? Why is there impropriety here?

Sometimes regulatory change can be a great benefit, but sometimes it can also be overreaching as well. In this case, I refer to the meat, if you will – no pun intended – of these amendments, the changes to the transportation network companies, or TNCs, if you will. While this bill does not give details concerning the regulations around these transportation network companies, or TNCs, again, it does give the government the power to make whatever rules they want and define TNCs however they wish. Mr. Speaker, that is troubling.

Given this government's track record dealing with transparency and consultation – again, I can go back to the consultation that was done on the steps of this Legislature regarding Bill 6. It seems that that was the only consultation this government heard, and now we're proceeding with a series, some sort of reduced input from the agricultural organizations to come forward with regulatory restrictions and input on Bill 6.

The government's delay and lack of any temporary solutions cost thousands of Albertans that were employed with ride-share companies such as Uber a way to supplement their income.

The Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

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

Mr. Nixon: Thanks, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Under 29(2)(a)?

Mr. Nixon: Absolutely, Mr. Speaker. I was very interested in what the member was saying, and I'm hoping that he could finish his comments, please.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Strankman: Thank you again, Mr. Speaker. I seem to be in an illustrious mode here today. I want to continue on speaking about the TNCs. Companies like Uber were designed to be a part of ride sharing, and they're not taxis. Taxis involve a class 4 licence for professional drivers who drive company vehicles as a full-time job. The ride-share apps are designed for part-time and casual peak-time work. It's not exactly comparing apples to apples.

Mr. Speaker, there are many people – again I revert to rural areas now – who drive large, commercial-sized vehicles who have class

1 licences such as the Member for Drumheller-Stettler. We have large farm machinery. It's almost industrial sized, and the requirement for a slight improvement to the qualifications of these drivers is an important thing because people are invoking a method of trade. The idea that having a slightly higher level of qualifications for the operation of a vehicle is reasonable.

A quick anecdote: I'd like to recall a story from, I think, Toronto, where a large taxi drivers' protest regarding Uber was going on, and an interested bystander opened his Uber app to find that hundreds of available Uber rides were in the same group as the taxi drivers.

10:30

So it's a coincidence, Mr. Speaker, that although there may be concerns by some commercial operations that there are not options available to people – as long as there is a level of safety imposed, I think it's acceptable. Safety is always an important fact. Assuming that somehow a class 5 licence is more dangerous than a class 4 is serious business. Millions of class 5 drivers are on the road at any given time, many with passengers, but the addition of being able to use an app to get a ride and pay for it does not diminish people's ability to drive safely. It's the education that they have to achieve their different qualifications. Companies like Uber have rating systems that give real-time feedback to users to help ensure the highest of standards.

Given the distances we travel throughout Alberta, ride-sharing companies are a useful tool in rural Alberta. As I was preparing for this dissertation, Mr. Speaker, I gave great thought to the rural area that we live in, where my wife's retired uncle travels back and forth to a relatively urban, or larger, centre on a regular basis. Giving instructions to return home by way of a fertilizer dealer or a business that supplies agricultural parts or equipment would be a marvellous way to save time and create safety because there would be fewer people on the roads, but it would also be, at the behest of this government, environmentally friendly because there would be fewer vehicles on the road. Providing a service that did not necessarily exist in the rural areas, partially because there simply isn't the volume to set up a taxi in a rural environment, certainly not enough of a market for those taxis to meet the needs on a Friday night, the TNCs can fill the gap but won't if there are too many barriers.

It also gives both men and women an equal opportunity to participate in this casual employment. Roughly half of class 5 drivers in Alberta are women, 51 per cent actually, whereas with a professional designation, class 1, 2, or 4, only 12 per cent are women.

It makes little sense that many of us have no issue in letting our friends and neighbours drive us and our families around with nary a thought, but somehow when payment is an issue, then problems arise. I do relate it to the aviation industry, Mr. Speaker, that I also have some acquaintance with. In private industry . . .

The Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

Are there any other members wishing to speak to Bill 16, Traffic Safety Amendment Act, 2016? The leader of the third party.

Mr. McIver: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm happy to rise to speak on Bill 16. A lot of the ground that I'd like to cover has been covered, but I think it's worthy of talking about. There are a few things that I think the government seems to have gotten right on this.

Certainly, the one change, to the in-car breathalyzer system, is a positive one. Here's the interesting thing. During my time when I was Transportation minister, I once asked the question: what's our rate of graduating people from the system? Like, how long do they

have to be on it, how does that work, and how do we make sure that they're going to drive without drinking and all of that? I was very surprised to learn that one of the biggest impediments to people graduating from the interlock system is that they don't want to. That sounded crazy to me, so I'll explain that because it's bound to sound crazy to other members of the House, too.

Interestingly enough, Mr. Speaker, a lot of the people currently on the interlock system want to stay on it because they have and they know they have an alcohol problem. What they tell people in Alberta Transportation, as was explained to me, is: "Please don't make me give up the interlock – I'll pay you the monthly fee – because if you do, then I will drive impaired, and I will lose my licence for two or three years or whatever the judge decides when I get in front of the judge. Then I won't be able to keep my job, I won't be able to look after my family, and I won't be able to pay my own bills because I know that I'm a slave to alcohol." While it's not everybody, there are a surprising number of Albertans that actually, in a really odd sort of way are responsible enough to recognize their own weakness and guard against it using the interlock system as a crutch.

First of all, none of us should have any tolerance for impaired driving, but besides that, I'm going to say that this change in the legislation is one where, in my view, the government got it right. Of course, I wouldn't want to characterize everybody on that system as being in this set of circumstances, Mr. Speaker. I just thought it was interesting to note that there are a surprising number of Albertans that actually choose to stay on it so they don't drive impaired. That, interestingly enough, is a pretty good safeguard.

The increased penalties for street racing are something that is important. People really do get killed street racing. It's something that the police across this province fight on a regular basis. I know that during the couple of years I had on the police commission for the Calgary Police Service, it was a constant concern. In fact, it's one of the reasons that that police service was very much in favour of keeping a racing track around, largely because when that was around, they actually – and the police took part in it – got people to what they called Friday night secret street. On Friday night they would have young people get together, bring their cars to the track, and under supervised conditions and with some safety equipment and people there and with a separated track and, of course, completely separated from public traffic, which is kind of important, they would be able to see whose car could go the fastest in a quarter of a mile.

For me, it's one of those things that's fun to watch, but as not a really big car guy the chances of you seeing me there are kind of low unless I'm sitting in the stands watching. Nonetheless, there are people interested in doing that. I think that it's important to have places for people to try to get their thrills experienced in a safe way, but when they don't, that is in no way ever an excuse for street racing. To actually have the penalty increased to more fully recognize the extent of the damage that people can do when they're street racing is a very good idea and one that I support.

Now, the area of ride sharing in the legislation is one that probably I'll have more to say about in Committee of the Whole, but for now I will say that I've had some discussions with members of the taxi industry, that are looking for a level playing field. That's all they're looking for, which is, I think, reasonable. They're interested in making sure that people with ride sharing have adequate insurance, have adequate security checks, have adequate mechanical inspections. Now, when I asked the Transportation minister in estimates about those things, he said: yeah; we will do 2 out of 3 of those things with the legislation. He indicated to me that they were going to leave vehicle inspections to the local municipality.

I will part company a little bit with my colleague from the Official Opposition in that, while he's right that many of us don't think twice about taking a ride with a friend or a family member, when you take a ride with somebody for compensation, while the personal trust level may be the same, it becomes a business relationship rather than a personal relationship even if the person you're paying in the ride share happens to be a friend or a family member. While the member opposite may see it as the same – and I certainly recognize why he says that – I'm pretty sure that my insurance company doesn't see it as the same thing, and I'm pretty sure that the hon. member's insurance company doesn't see it as the same thing. That's, I think, where we have to be careful to make sure that people that pay for a ride are protected as well as the driver.

Of course, there's an uninsured drivers' fund, but if we do anything legislative that has us dipping into that fund on purpose, then we really should think again about what we're doing here. That is meant as a last resort, when someone is driving against the law either by themselves or for compensation without adequate insurance.

10:40

I intend to talk some more with people currently in the delivery system, people that deliver people from point A to point B for compensation. I will say that while there are some things to like in the legislation, unfortunately one of the usual shortfalls is the lack of consultation, and I say that because members of the taxi industry have told me that just in the last few days they've been asked to give their comments on the legislation whereas probably they should have been asked for their comments long before the legislation was printed or presented to this House. You know, once again, with all due respect, the government is chasing their tail a little bit when it comes to public consultation. I think they're kind of behind the eight ball, and they need to catch up. It's kind of unfortunate that we're going to have to try to do some of the catch-up while the legislation is before the House, but, Mr. Speaker, here we are. That's where the government has left it.

I intend to do some more consultation with some of my colleagues, with members that are in the transportation business right now, and we may – “may” is the operative word because, of course, we're going to try to do the consultation for the government in the absence of the government doing that, a good consultation, before delivering the legislation to the House. Admittedly, we're flying by the seat of our pants because the government essentially hasn't really left any choice by the fact that they didn't do full consultation before they brought the legislation in. We will try to do the government's work for them, Mr. Speaker, and thereafter we may have some suggestions for some improvements to the legislation.

Thank you.

The Speaker: Any questions to the Member for Calgary-Hays under section 29(2)(a)? The Member for Edmonton-Decore.

Mr. Nielsen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Well, I guess that, first off, I'd like to address the comments with regard to the consultation process. You know, I have to disagree with the hon. member. There was certainly consultation that went on. I know that I did it myself. I have been speaking with the taxi folks for as long as or before the election even occurred, so I was bringing those comments forward during the entire time. I've spoken with them since the election. We've had the representatives of the taxi group come to see us to talk about their concerns and more things moving forward as well as consulted with all of the stakeholders, the TNCs, traffic safety partners, and whatnot. So, again, I do have to completely disagree.

We have done some very thorough consultation, which was what guided the creation of some of this.

I guess the other thing to quickly address, Mr. Speaker, is with regard to the carpooling. None of this really affects the carpooling. That will continue on as it has, and I understand that some of the TNCs may in the future be bringing forward a section of their app, I guess, that will deal with carpooling. So that will simply move forward.

I guess that during this discussion – and I call it a discussion, Mr. Speaker, because I'm sensing consensus right across here – the biggest thing that everybody is concerned with is with regard to safety. We want to make sure that drivers are safe, passengers are safe, pedestrians are safe, that everybody that's using the roads is safe. When we had initially touched on – I'll have to apologize; I can't remember which member it was that brought up the fact that Uber had ceased operations over the insurance issue. Quite honestly, that was a choice. TappCar decided to use the type of commercial insurance that was available at the time, and they began to operate. Uber made the choice not to do that. That's not to say that that was a wrong choice or a bad choice. It was just simply a choice that, you know, was available to them at that time.

When we start talking about the class 4 licence, again, this is with regard to safety. I mean, it doesn't matter, if you're a commercial operator, whether you're working full-time or part-time. If you drive a large semi part-time, you're still driving a large semi, and it requires you to have a class 1 licence. With class 4 there is the extra training. There's training on customer service. You know, as a class 5 driver, when I go to get my insurance, my company always asks me: do you drive to work or don't you? When I say that I drive to work and ask why the price goes up, that's because, as they say, risk increases because I'm on the road more often. When you're a ride-for-hire driver, you're performing a service for a fee. Your risk increases because you're on the road more often. We want these folks to have the proper training and be capable to deal with all of those situations.

In terms of maybe why this was taking a little bit longer, certainly we wanted to make sure that all of the basic regulations were in place before we started trying to develop an insurance policy. That is in front of the experts now and should be ready to go on July 1 of this year. As we create the regulations surrounding TNCs – the reason they're not in the legislation is because the industry, quite honestly, is evolving very, very quickly. I mean, we've already started talking about a carpooling service within the TNCs. If we start creating regulations in the legislation right now, these companies won't be able to offer their carpooling until we come back and change those to allow them. With the regulations being left up to the ministry, those regulations can be changed to adapt quickly for those businesses that want to make those changes and those improvements and offer a larger service for their customers.

At this point I hope I've addressed some of the concerns from the other side. Like I said, I think there's very large consensus across the House that this is about safety, making our streets as safe as possible. I don't need to delve into all the other points because, like I said, I think we have consensus there, Mr. Speaker. I look forward to further discussions about this in Committee of the Whole and third reading as well.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Are there any questions or comments for the Member for Edmonton-Decore under 29(2)(a)?

Hearing none, are there other members who would like to speak to Bill 16, Traffic Safety Amendment Act, 2016?

An Hon. Member: Question.

[Motion carried; Bill 16 read a second time]

**10:50 Government Bills and Orders
Committee of the Whole**

[Ms Jabbour in the chair]

The Chair: I'd like to call the committee to order.

**Bill 14
Health Professions Amendment Act, 2016**

The Chair: Are there any questions, comments, or amendments with respect to this bill? The hon. Member for St. Albert.

Ms Renaud: Thank you, Madam Chair. I'm pleased to rise and speak to Bill 14, the Health Professions Amendment Act, 2016. The Health Professions Amendment Act is a legislative framework through which regulatory colleges partner with government to create accountability mechanisms in our health system. I won't spend a lot of time talking about the importance of the act; instead, I'd like to jump to why these amendments are needed.

Amendments to the Health Professions Act are required to ensure that it continues to reflect Alberta's constantly evolving health workforce and health system. The last significant amendments to the act occurred in 2008. The amendments in 2008 addressed the governance of pharmacy technicians, podiatrists, and inspections by regulatory colleges.

Recently Alberta Health, in collaboration with the Alberta Federation of Regulated Health Professions, reviewed the act and identified necessary revisions. These changes are needed to better enable the colleges to regulate the professions and protect the public while maintaining accountability. The federation is made up of the registrars or chief executive officers of 29 regulatory colleges who are governed under the Health Professions Act. Amendments were also identified by Alberta Health Services and by individual colleges. These amendments are necessary to ensure that the act is responsive to health professions and the changing health care system.

The proposed amendments include adding two professions, namely physician assistant and diagnostic medical sonographer, and giving the minister authority to direct the College of Physicians & Surgeons of Alberta to accredit Alberta Health Services facilities in which physicians provide services by removing restrictions on the ownership of physical therapy practices and by updating practice statements, protecting additional titles, and changing the names of three colleges and renaming schedule 20.

I am sure that many members have questions and comments to make on these changes, so I will just stop there. Thank you.

The Chair: Any further questions, comments, or amendments? The hon. Member for Highwood.

Mr. W. Anderson: Thank you, Madam Chair. I'm happy to rise and speak to Bill 14, the Health Professions Amendment Act, 2016. This bill provides a number of quality amendments and good housekeeping items that I'm happy to support.

Bringing physician assistants under the College of Physicians & Surgeons of Alberta as regulated members is a good decision. Physician assistants are common in the military, and if this decision helps the men and women of our armed forces transition to life after service, I think it's a positive step. While there are only about 30 physician assistants in Alberta presently, if this provides some incentive to physician assistants to come to Alberta, then again it's a step in the right direction.

Under the current Health Professions Act government health facilities are exempt from the requirement to be accredited by the

College of Physicians & Surgeons of Alberta. Compare this with private and not-for-profit facilities, that are required to be accredited by the college. Bill 14 will grant the Health minister the ability to direct the college to accredit government health facilities. In order for our health system to work properly, it needs to maintain the confidence and trust of Albertans, the ones that ultimately pay for and access the system. By providing the Health minister with the ability to require government health facilities to be accredited by the College of Physicians & Surgeons of Alberta, we can be confident that the facilities they access for their health care needs are operating properly and meeting the same standards as private and not-for-profit facilities. This change levels the playing field and provides Albertans confidence that the system is working in their best interests.

I do have some concerns with the proposed changes that would see the creation of joint college and associations. The College of Opticians becomes the college and association of opticians, and the College of Physical Therapists becomes the physiotherapy college and association. A regulatory college such as those prescribed under the Health Professions Act exists for the benefit of all Albertans. It exists to regulate and ensure that its members are acting in the best interest of Albertans and conducting themselves accordingly. The purpose of an association is to promote and advocate in the best interests of their members. When you combine the two organizations, it can lead to potential conflict and conflict of interest. Best practice is to have the two separate. It would be of great benefit to see this trend continue.

That being said, the issue of having a combined association and college is outweighed by the many benefits of good governance and the provisions of this bill. For that reason I support Bill 14, the Health Professions Amendment Act, 2016, and I encourage all my fellow members to do the same.

Thank you.

The Chair: Any other members wishing to speak? The hon. Minister of Justice.

Ms Ganley: Thank you very much, Madam Chair. I move that the committee rise and report.

The Chair: The intention is to call for the question.

[The voice vote indicated that the clauses of Bill 14 were agreed to]

[Several members rose calling for a division. The division bell was rung at 10:56 a.m.]

[Fifteen minutes having elapsed, the committee divided]

[Ms Jabbour in the chair]

For:

Anderson, S.	Hanson	Piquette
Anderson, W.	Hoffman	Pitt
Babcock	Horne	Renaud
Bilous	Kazim	Rosendahl
Carson	Kleinsteuber	Schmidt
Ceci	Littlewood	Schreiner
Connolly	Loewen	Shepherd
Cortes-Vargas	Loyola	Smith
Dach	Luff	Starke
Dang	Malkinson	Strankman
Drysdale	McCuaig-Boyd	Sucha
Eggen	McIver	Sweet
Feehan	McKittrick	Turner
Fildebrandt	Miller	van Dijken

Fitzpatrick	Miranda	Westhead
Ganley	Nielsen	Woollard
Goehring	Nixon	Yao
Gotfried		
Totals:	For – 52	Against – 0

[The clauses of Bill 14 agreed to]

[Title and preamble agreed to]

The Chair: Shall the bill be reported? Are you agreed?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Chair: Opposed? That's carried.

Ms Ganley: This time I really move that the committee rise and report.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

[Motion carried]

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

Ms Sweet: Madam Speaker, the Committee of the Whole has had under consideration a certain bill. The committee reports the following bill: Bill 14.

The Deputy Speaker: Does the Assembly concur in the report? Say aye.

Hon. Members: Aye.

The Deputy Speaker: Opposed? So ordered.

Government Bills and Orders Third Reading

Bill 14 Health Professions Amendment Act, 2016

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for St. Albert.

Ms Renaud: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I am pleased to move third reading of Bill 14, the Health Professions Amendment Act, 2016.

Alberta's health system and health workforce are changing and evolving, and public and professional expectations are shifting. The act needs to be responsive to these developments. The act needs to reflect advancements in health professions and a new way of thinking and working that impacts how care is provided to Albertans. At the same time the act must provide for the wants and needs of Albertans. It must support government's vision of providing the right care at the right time in the right place and from the right provider with the correct information. While we recognize that adapting to change is important, one constant must remain, protecting the public. The act needs to ensure that the public continues to receive safe, high-quality care and that health providers remain accountable while providing for these new developments.

[The Speaker in the chair]

The proposed amendments to the Health Professions Act balance these needs. The amendments enable the health system and health providers working within it to move forward while maintaining a strong foundation of safety and accountability. The proposed amendments will regulate two additional professions to ensure

these health providers are accountable for the care they provide and adhere to the highest professional standards of practice.

The amendments also provide for ensuring that all facilities are accredited using the same rigorous standards and that patient safety is improved. They allow for new, innovative models of offering care from the same qualified health professionals. Practice statements are updated to reflect the full scope to which professionals practise. Additional professional titles are protected, so Albertans can be assured that only qualified individuals are providing care and that no one can misrepresent their services. Name changes more clearly delineate the roles and responsibilities when an organization serves both as a regulatory college and association.

The act was last amended eight years ago. These updates are needed to support and enable the work of health professionals and their regulatory colleges. Supporting them, in turn, enables safer, better care for Albertans.

I ask all members to support Bill 14, the Health Professions Amendment Act, 2016, and the health care improvements that will result from these proposed amendments. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Hon. member, do I understand you to mean that you're making that motion on behalf of the Health minister? Is that correct?

Ms Renaud: Yes, that's correct.

The Speaker: Thank you.

Anyone else wish to speak to the motion?

Would you like to close debate, hon. member?

Ms Renaud: Yes, I would. I close debate on Bill 14.

The Clerk: Bill 14, the Health Professions Amendment Act, 2016 . . .

The Speaker: Hold it, hon. Clerk. I believe we have three members who are asking for a division.

The Clerk: It's too late. I just started reading.

The Speaker: Keep going.

[Motion carried; Bill 14 read a third time]

The Speaker: I think a division had been called, is that right?

Hon. members, I've been advised that since the Clerk was reading third reading, a division does not apply, so the motion passes as carried.

11:20 Government Bills and Orders Committee of the Whole (continued)

[Ms Jabbour in the chair]

The Chair: I will call the committee to order.

Bill 10 Fiscal Statutes Amendment Act, 2016

The Chair: Any questions, comments, or amendments with respect to this bill? The hon. Member for Strathmore-Brooks.

Mr. Fildebrandt: Thank you, Madam Chair. I'm rising to speak to Bill 10, the Unlimited Debt and Fiscal Irresponsibility Act. Let's

just get back right into fun debate in this House. I think we've been quiet long enough in here.

Madam Chair, this is perhaps one of the most irresponsible pieces of legislation that this Legislature has dealt with in the year since the last election. The Minister of Finance had the gall to introduce a bill just last fall that significantly increased the legal capacity of the government to borrow in this province. It abolished any restrictions whatsoever on the ability of the government to borrow for operational deficits, and it significantly increased the overall ceiling for the debt capacity of the government for both capital and operations up to 15 per cent.

I remember very vividly the Minister of Finance standing in this House and stating that 15 per cent was a very prudent debt ceiling to be setting, that going beyond 15 per cent would be irresponsible, but we could trust this government to be responsible because it would only be 15 per cent. "We're from the government. Trust us. We're going to do things right."

Now, at the time the Official Opposition stood up and continually warned the government that we were at significant risk of starting to act like the U.S. Congress, where about every nine to 10 months the U.S. Congress approves an increase to its debt ceiling. It's a joke. It's a debt elevator, where every year the U.S. Congress takes their debt up one more floor.

You know, we talked about the history of what's happened in this province. Ralph Klein and Jim Dinning put in place very strict restrictions against borrowing and deficit financing in this province, and that was watered down over time, originally, I think, for relatively decent reasons, to allow for P3s and limited borrowing for certain projects that had an actual financial value as an asset, that could actually be liquidated as a proper capital asset should be able to be if it's going to be borrowed for, that you can liquidate that asset at an actual cash value.

Those laws were repeatedly watered down, we saw, by the Redford government. We saw them watered down again by the NDP just last fall. We warned that this continued watering down of the restrictions against borrowing and deficit financing in this province would lead us into a debt crisis, that the government would let go of all restrictions whatsoever on deficit financing.

The minister had said that our concerns were not well founded. He said that they were not well founded when we warned about what would happen last fall. He said that there was no chance that we would ever go above 15 per cent debt to GDP. We were very clear. We provided very clear evidence that the Minister of Finance's revenue projections were grossly optimistic, that they would not meet their revenue targets, and that if they continued on their spending plan with unrealistic revenue projections, we would be into deficits in perpetuity.

We've seen this government revise its balanced budget date far too many times for comfort, so discomfoting that we have now suffered five credit downgrades in the short history of this government. During the election they promised to balance the budget by 2018 and then a week into the campaign had to move it to 2019. Then within about a month or two of being elected, they moved it from 2019 to 2020. Now they say: maybe, sort of, if we get lucky, 2024, 2025. They won't have to worry about it, Madam Chair. It's going to be the Wildrose who balances the budget by 2024.

That is their plan. Their plan is for somebody else to fix their problems. We've seen other governments across the country do this in the past, where governments sort of throw a dart at the board and say, "We're going to get to balance there," and every year they kick it one year down the road. We've been running deficits – this is our ninth consecutive consolidated deficit in this province, and every single year the government of the past said, "We're going to balance

the budget probably two years down the road," and every year they would move that target out one more year.

It was one thing for us to do that while we still had a lot of money left in the sustainability fund. It was one thing to do that when we were still coming from a position where we had no debt, when we were debt free and paid in full in this province. Now, though, we have a significant debt load, exceeding \$20 billion right now, and we have no money left in the sustainability fund. The result has been not just the downgrade in the province's credit rating but a downgrade in this government's credibility that they will ever balance the budget.

Just last Thursday, while we were debating Bill 10, the minister stood here and said that we were creditworthy, that this government had a plan, and we should just trust them. The minister had the guts to say that we were fearmongering, and just later in that afternoon, Thursday afternoon, Alberta received another credit downgrade, our second, so far, from Standard & Poor's. That is shameful, Madam Chair.

When the budget was introduced, we had a credit downgrade. I believe it was DBRS. DBRS downgraded the credit rating of this province less than 24 hours after they introduced their budget. Now, that's not coincidental timing, Madam Chair. It had nothing to do with the price of oil. If it had to do with the price of oil, they would have downgraded it when the price of oil went down. But, instead, they downgraded the credit rating of this province within hours of them introducing a budget. It's no coincidence, further, that Standard & Poor's gave us our second downgrading from that one agency. I believe, if I'm not mistaken, we're into the double A's now, perhaps even double-A minus. They downgraded our credit rating while we are debating Bill 10 to repeal any debt ceiling and restrictions on borrowing whatsoever.

The creditors have looked at this government's fiscal plan and decided, quite rightfully, that it's not credible, that they have no plan to pay it back. When the government borrows money and they are borrowing money to refinance existing debt, we have a very big problem. We have a very big problem. In our private lives if you have to take out a line of credit to pay your credit card, you've got a debt problem, and that is what our government is doing here. They are taking out a line of credit to pay the credit card debt now. It is extremely dangerous and reckless. They are now trying to change the rules to take away any restrictions on borrowing whatsoever.

In response to the Official Opposition's concerns about a credit downgrade directly related to Bill 10, the Minister of Finance, blustering, responded that the Official Opposition just wanted a PST. I don't know what the minister was smoking that day, but it must have been something very potent, Madam Chair. It must have been very potent for the Minister of Finance to believe that it is the responsibility of the Official Opposition, somehow, that this province had a credit downgrade and that the Official Opposition, the only party in this House that ran on no new taxes – you may have heard that before – wanted a massive tax increase akin to the carbon tax that the government is expected to impose on Albertans later today, that we wanted a PST, somehow.

That is the response we're getting from this government, not substantive responses to real, serious questions. Albertans have real, serious questions about this because when our credit is downgraded, it costs more to borrow. Every single dollar that we are paying on interest to the banks is a dollar that does not go to build schools, to build roads, to build hospitals, or to hire teachers or nurses. At the end of the day the biggest enemy of social programs is social democrats who can't get their spending under control. They are going to spend this province broke to the point where we are spending billions of dollars a year on interest payments rather than putting that money where it should be going,

directly to building important capital projects and providing government services. So what do they have to show for it? Bluster.

11:30

We ask about the serious consequences, if the government will take responsibility for the credit downgrade. We ask real questions, and all we get – I'm not even sure it was a talking point; it must have just spilled out of their heads to think that somehow we want a PST in response to their government's plan getting us a credit downgrade. Well, Madam Chair, there are few issues that I am more passionate about than defending the fiscal position of this province. I was elected by the people of Strathmore-Brooks to come here and defend the Alberta advantage, that made modern Alberta great, that made Alberta the economic powerhouse of North America, that made us at one point paid in full, with no debt and money in the bank, that gave us the flat tax, that gave us the lowest business tax in Canada, a real Alberta advantage that supercharged our economy and made us an absolute magnet for investment, investment that this government is driving out of this province as fast as they possibly can.

That's why, Madam Chair, I'm pleased to introduce an amendment to Bill 10. Can I read . . .

The Chair: We're waiting for the original copy, hon. member.

This will be known as amendment A2.

Continue, hon. member.

Mr. Fildebrandt: I move that Bill 10, Fiscal Statutes Amendment Act, 2016, be amended in section 5 by striking out subsection (2) and substituting the following:

(2) Section 3 is amended by adding the following after subsection (2):

(3) If a report made pursuant to section 6(1) indicates that Crown debt will exceed 15% of GDP for Alberta for a fiscal year, notwithstanding section 43(1)(a) of the Legislative Assembly Act, no member of the Executive Council shall receive any salary prescribed under that section until a subsequent report made pursuant to section 6(1) indicates Crown debt will be 15% of GDP for Alberta or less.

Now, Madam Chair, Albertans who don't have government jobs like us in this House are expected to perform well to get paid. Being a minister of the Crown entitles you to significantly higher remuneration than most Members of this Legislative Assembly. Most Members of the Legislative Assembly are paid a salary, and if you have special duties like being a minister or the Speaker, you get a significant increase in your pay. Now, if you are a minister of the Crown here, you have a basic fiduciary obligation to responsibly manage the finances of this province. I believe that if you cannot keep your debt under 15 per cent of GDP, when we were once paid in full in this province with money in the bank, then you're not doing your job, and you should not get a bonus for it.

That is what this amendment does. If ministers of the Crown, in particular the Minister of Finance but all ministers of the Crown, cannot keep the debt under 15 per cent of GDP, then they don't deserve the significant increase in pay that comes with their position. This would be considered performance pay in the private sector. Even in the public sector here we have something called pay at risk: you're guaranteed a certain salary, but if you don't meet your performance measures, your salary falls back to a lower level. We have the bill regarding agencies, boards, and commissions here. It seeks to standardize some of those pay-at-risk structures in the government. It's not a bad idea that you have two kinds of salaries, your minimum salary for just having the job and then a maximum salary if you're doing your job properly.

I believe that if the government cannot balance the budget after nine consecutive consolidated deficits, they're not doing their job. If they have to repeal a piece of legislation that they passed just four and a half months ago, then they're not doing their job. If they cannot keep the debt of this province under 15 per cent of GDP, then they're not doing their job, and they shouldn't get paid extra for it anyway.

That is why I'm pleased to move this amendment to ensure that ministers have at least some financial incentive to behave responsibly if their own sense of duty can't do it for them. Thank you.

The Chair: Any other speakers to amendment A2? The hon. Member for Highwood.

Mr. W. Anderson: Thank you, Madam Chair. It's my pleasure to rise in support of this amendment. This government just seven months ago argued forcefully for the increase of the debt ceiling to 15 per cent. It is difficult to see how this government has any credibility left for their ability to handle spending.

Albertans are hurting. Over 100,000 Albertans are out of work. Unemployment in Alberta is higher than the national average, and this government refuses to even consider holding the debt to less than 20 per cent of GDP. A 15 per cent debt ceiling is over \$50 billion; at 20 per cent it's \$75 billion. Considering that a few years ago we were debt free, that is an absolutely stunning amount of debt to be passing on.

What's worse is that this government cannot even meet their own spending limits after just six months. A government breaking its own legislation only six months after creating it is not the kind of thing you want to see in mature democracies. I suspect it is an Alberta record, but unlike setting a record for the hundred-metre dash, this is not something to be proud of. In fact, this is an embarrassment of historic proportions. This government has one thing in common with Usain Bolt, however. Our children will be talking about both of them long into the future, with this debt load.

With the elimination of the debt ceiling we see this government endorsing generalization debt. This government has no plan to get their spending under control. They have no ideas how to eliminate the debt they are saddling our children with. This government has singlehandedly ruined our province's pristine credit rating. In the course of 12 months they have seen our credit rating downgraded four times. This is a record. In response to the government sending the Finance minister to talk some sense to the credit agencies, all we see is that the result was another downgrade. With our debt getting past \$50 billion, we will owe the banks \$2 billion each year just in interest payments. That's \$2 billion without a penny going to principal because there's no plan to repay the principal.

The question Albertans are asking is: where is the money going to come from? This government has made it abundantly clear that it will not cut spending. If the government is not going to cut spending, then it has to raise taxes. If this government is considering a PST, well, shame. They're already introducing an ND PST carbon tax. Even with the \$3 billion they're planning on collecting from hard-working Albertans, they would barely cover the interest payments on the new debt they raised. None of it is going to that, of course. Most of it will go to a green slush fund for the NDP to splash around. This government continues to talk about how they refuse to consider cuts to government spending. What they refuse to consider is that every day they don't tackle their ever-increasing debt is another day that a future government will have to take stronger actions to get this province's fiscal house in order.

This House has a bill in front of them that tackles the cycle of debt created by payday loans. I support that bill, and it's unfortunate

that this government refuses to take its own advice and apply it to its own spending practices. This government has no plan to reduce spending and tackle the debt that they and the previous government created. This amendment would at least signal to our creditors that we take their concerns seriously, that we have some idea of a plan on how to tackle the debt and bring back the Alberta advantage.

For that reason, I strongly support this amendment, and I call on my hon. colleagues to do so as well. Let's begin to make hard decisions today so our children aren't forced to make painful decisions tomorrow.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Any other members wishing to speak to amendment A2? The hon. Minister of Finance.

Mr. Ceci: Thank you very much, Madam Chair. I won't be supporting the amendment. It doesn't look like there's a plan there at all, actually. I will say that we are not in a debt crisis. I will say that if you look at page 9 of the fiscal plan, it talks about debt-to-GDP ratio, and it shows all the other provinces. We know that the federal government is at 31 per cent debt to GDP. Even if you look at the three years of the fiscal plan, both the estimate target and the second target, it does go into 15.5 per cent at the end of three years. If you look on page 9, that is nowhere close to Manitoba, Ontario, Quebec, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, P.E.I., or Newfoundland. The kind of exaggerations being made by the member opposite are just that. They're exaggerations.

11:40

With regard to the credit downgrades I do want to say that Alberta, like every other oil-producing jurisdiction, not only jurisdiction but company, is experiencing the same rash of downgrades from their bond-rating agencies that do that.

With regard to the statement I made last week, I think it lacked the context. The context was that I stood up and said: you know, if you seriously want to reduce the deficit, then you need to bring in something like a PST. I only said the PST part, but I think Standard & Poor's are saying that the deficit, that they're critical of, they want reduced. They say that you can do a number of things to reduce it.

So you could do a number of things to reduce the deficit. You could invest less in capital across this province, and we know that that'll have a negative effect on putting Albertans back to work. You could reduce program spending, but at this point in time Albertans are looking for the supports that they need to get through this downturn, so that would be a problem. You could do fewer diversification initiatives across the province. We know that the oil and gas roller coaster is one of the prime reasons we're in this challenge. Our energy sector is the prime mover for so much of our revenues, and it has dropped off the map: \$9 billion collected for royalties in 2014-15 and going down to a projection of about \$1.4 billion this year. You can almost say that the deficit that we're experiencing is a direct result of the drop in oil royalties to this province, so we need to diversify.

You could get the deficit down with something like a PST. If the opposition is saying that the deficit needs to be smaller right away, then that's how you get the deficit down, but we're not going to do that. We're going to carry Albertans with a shock absorber budget for a period of time so that we can get through this downturn to a better place.

While the opposition member says that I must be smoking something, I will tell you something, Madam Chair. I sometimes am warm in this House, I sometimes am hot in this House, I'm sometimes smoking hot in this House, but I never just smoke in this House.

Thank you.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Strathmore-Brooks.

Mr. Fildebrandt: Thank you, Madam Chair. It doesn't surprise me to see the minister stand here and argue against cutting his own salary because he can't do his job. You know, it is something. If he had any confidence in his own legislation from five months ago, he would have no problem voting for this amendment. Actually, we had put forward an amendment to the original 15 per cent debt ceiling bill from five months ago, a very similar amendment that would have imposed financial penalties on cabinet if they exceeded the 15 per cent debt-to-GDP limit that they have here, and they voted against it then. They obviously had no confidence in their own legislation, and that's why they're voting against it now. I'd be pretty embarrassed if I introduced legislation five months ago and after just five months I had to repeal my own legislation. I would be pretty embarrassed by that.

Now, the Minister of Finance seems to think that going to talk to creditors is going to restore our credit rating. I believe that real, serious, concrete action is what's going to restore the credit rating of this province, but the minister seems to think that travelling to New York and Toronto to talk to the creditors is what's going to solve things. What happened when he did it? While he was talking to them, they immediately reduced our credit rating. His very presence in the room with these guys hurt the credibility of this government. The creditworthiness of the government was hurt by the minister going in to talk to them. It was bad enough when they saw the budget, but when they actually talked to the minister and saw how loopy their plan was to get our debt under control, they said: "Oh, goodness. It's worse than we thought after we actually met the guy."

I respectfully ask that the Minister of Finance refrain from talking to the creditors for the next three years. Not only will it save some money on travel, but I think it will save a heck of a lot of money because every time the Minister of Finance has appeared before the creditors, we've gotten a credit downgrade. I mean, it's like if I had my own personal creditworthiness hurt because I wasn't paying my credit card bills on time, and then I went to meet with, say, representatives of the TD Bank, and I was shifty, and my plans were not very solid, and then they downgraded my own creditworthiness again. Well, that's pretty much what happened. The Minister of Finance walked into the creditors' offices and said: I'm good for it.

You know, a lot of us will remember *The Simpsons* episode where Lisa Simpson was President, succeeding, bizarrely enough, a President Donald Trump. I don't know how they saw that coming. But Lisa Simpson was President, and she had serious trouble with the debt load left to her government by President Donald Trump, and she hired her brother, Bart Simpson, to go and deal with the creditors. She hired Bart Simpson to deal with China and all of the other countries who had been lending money to the United States, and Bart's plan was essentially just to go and lay out their concerns and be a cool guy. Well, it didn't really work in *The Simpsons*, and it didn't work here. When the Minister of Finance went and spoke with the credit-rating agencies, we got a credit downgrade just from his very presence.

Now, the Minister of Finance has blamed everything on the price of oil here. Well, if our credit rating was downgraded only on the price of oil, why did we not get our credit downgraded a few days before the budget was introduced rather than less than 24 hours after the budget was introduced? Why did we not have our credit – the price of oil has not significantly changed. In between the time of our last downgrade and our current downgrade there has been no significant change in the price of oil. In fact, oil may have actually come up a little bit.

There has not been a significant change in the price of oil since we last had our credit rating downgraded and the credit-rating downgrade of last Thursday, so obviously oil is not the reason for that. The price of oil hasn't changed in that time. All that has changed is that this government, after introducing a grossly irresponsible budget, has now got a piece of legislation before us, that we're debating right now, that repeals any limit whatsoever on the ability of the government to borrow. That is why we've had a credit downgrade.

And he has presented to us this bizarre false dichotomy, that we have only two options: massive deficits or a PST. It doesn't even cross their minds that we could cut spending in this province. It doesn't even cross their minds that the most bloated government in the country, that spends two and a half thousand dollars more per capita on programs than British Columbia, can't cut a dime out of its budget, that the only two options before us are massive deficits in perpetuity or a provincial sales tax, which would probably still come with additional deficits. Madam Chair, the Official Opposition believes that there is another way, a way that has worked for Alberta before, and that is to get our spending under control and balance the budget without raising taxes.

The Minister of Finance has talked about the oil and gas roller coaster. Well, I know the Member for Calgary-Greenway put it very well when he said that the minister is not even on a roller coaster anymore; he's on a merry-go-round. They're just going in circles on this. This government is just as dependent on the price of oil right now for its revenue projections as any government that has preceded it. Now, any government who promises you that they can do away with the price of oil and gas as a factor in our budget is not being honest with Albertans. No government can do it. You can maybe lessen it a little bit – you can cut spending, or you can raise taxes – but the fact is that any politician who tells you that they can get us completely off the oil and gas roller coaster is not being honest with Albertans.

11:50

This government – this government – is just as very dependent on the price of oil and gas as the last government and the government before that. They are being disingenuous with Albertans when they say that they're just going to wave their magic wand and get us off this through something they call diversification, which is really just a rehashed corporate welfare program, one that we saw in the 1980s, that left Albertans holding the bag for billions of dollars in misplaced adventures in the private sector by the government, when the government decides that it knows best, when the government can pick the winners and losers in the private sector and say that this sector is important and this one is not, so this sector is going to pay taxes to support another sector or another specific business. That's what they're doing.

If they believe that that is going to somehow wean us off oil and gas revenues in the next three years – they don't believe it, Madam Chair. They don't believe it's possible because it's not. It's been tried before, and it cost taxpayers billions of dollars. They should do what's right and put their own money where their mouth is and vote for this amendment. If they cannot balance the budget, if they cannot keep the debt under 15 per cent of GDP, then they do not deserve to have the big pay increase that comes with being a minister.

Thank you.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Devon.

Mr. Smith: Thank you, Madam Chair. I rise to speak on behalf of this amendment today. You know, it's very concerning. I believe as

a member that's been elected to this Legislature that we show some fiscal responsibility when it comes to the planning and the expenditures of the money that we have in this government. We are talking about a debt ceiling only because we have gone from a place of having a surplus to where we are now, in debt. Any time you start to consider debt, it's a very serious thing, whether it's personal or whether it's on behalf of the citizens of this province, within the government.

Debt ceilings, unfortunately, have had to be considered when governments have too often had a problem with spending and incurring debt and seemingly no ability to control that. Madam Chair, a debt ceiling, then, is when the government sets out for itself a legal limit, a legal limit on the amount that it can actually borrow. We are now having to have that conversation, and for many Albertans we're sort of looking at each other and wondering why we are having this conversation when just so recently we had a positive bank balance, so to speak.

You know, this amendment speaks to accountability. It speaks to the fact that the Executive Council is called to be accountable for the decisions that it makes, for the bills that it passes, for the bills that it brings before this Legislature. It's accountable for how it runs the various ministries of this government. When it does a good job, it deserves the credit that comes from doing a job and having done it well and spending the taxpayers' money wisely. When it does not, it should be accountable for those decisions as well. Now, a very famous President of the United States, when talking about accountability, said that the buck stopped with him. I think that's what this amendment is trying to get at, Madam Chair. It's trying to speak to this whole issue of accountability and how the executive is accountable for the decisions that they make.

You know, there's a maxim in society that says that the higher the level of responsibility you have, the higher the level of accountability. We see that in the working world. We see that in government, or at least we should see it in government. When you take on a higher level of responsibility, you're expected to take your experience and your judgment and apply it in a wise way to whatever the decision is that needs to be made. In this case, we're asking in this amendment that . . .

The Chair: Hon. member, I hesitate to interrupt, but pursuant to Standing Order 4(3) the committee must now rise and report.

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

Mr. Rosendahl: Madam Speaker, the Committee of the Whole has had under consideration a certain bill. The committee reports progress on the following bill: Bill 10. I wish to table copies of all amendments considered by the Committee of the Whole on this date for the official records of the Assembly.

The Deputy Speaker: Does the Assembly concur in the report? Say aye.

Hon. Members: Aye.

The Deputy Speaker: Opposed, say no. So ordered.
The hon. minister.

Ms Ganley: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Seeing the time and the progress we have made this morning, I move that we rise and reconvene at 1:30 p.m.

[Motion carried; the Assembly adjourned at 11:57 a.m.]

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