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The 29th Legislature
Third Session

Alberta Hansard

Thursday morning, November 9, 2017

Day 52

The Honourable Robert E. Wanner, Speaker

Legislative Assembly of Alberta The 29th Legislature

Third Session

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Legislative Assembly of Alberta

9 a.m.

Thursday, November 9, 2017

[Ms Sweet in the chair]

Prayers

The Acting Speaker: Let us each pray and reflect in our way. As we near the end of another week, may we maintain perspective and come together to remember those who fought and died for our way of life. By doing so, we have been afforded this incredible opportunity to stand in this very House each day. May we remember them today and every day. Amen.

Please be seated.

Orders of the Day

Government Bills and Orders

Committee of the Whole

[Ms Sweet in the chair]

The Deputy Chair: Good morning. I would like to call the committee to order.

Bill 24

An Act to Support Gay-Straight Alliances

The Deputy Chair: Are there any comments, questions, or amendments to be offered in respect to this bill? The hon. Minister of Infrastructure.

Ms Jansen: Thank you, Madam Chair. You know, I think that one of the things that's important to talk about as we continue this discussion on Bill 24 is the precursor to Bill 24, which was Bill 10. Bill 10 is a lived experience that profoundly changed me as a legislator. I want to say that as part of this discussion it's important to go over some of the details of Bill 10 because they were a learning experience for me. They were for my former caucus in the Progressive Conservative government. The lessons that we took away from Bill 10 really should create a framework for how our discussion goes forward on any issue surrounding the LGBTQ2-plus community.

Before I say that, I want to say that, you know, in 2013 I received the honour of being the first minister directly responsible for LGBTQ2-plus issues. It was an incredibly important moment. I want to give a nod to our former Premier Alison Redford, who was very progressive on social issues. She felt these were important enough to make sure that we paid special attention to them.

I had an opportunity to speak at Alberta's first gay-straight alliance conference at the University of Calgary, where students from around the province and especially ones from small towns told me and my colleagues in the government how important it was for them to have that one area of support, that one safe place in their day, in their community where they could be open and be themselves and not have to worry that someone was going to take that information forward.

Some of these kids told me that they had a guidance counsellor who would talk about that in the staff room, and the next day when they walked into a coffee shop, people would be discussing their sexuality in the coffee shop. That's the level of privacy some of these kids actually had. They were scared to talk to anyone about issues surrounding their lives, and a gay-straight alliance offered them the opportunity to do just that, a safe haven. That was critical.

We're talking about kids whose only option was sometimes having access to a phone line where they could have that conversation but never a face-to-face conversation with anyone, and that's really sad.

We released the province's first homophobic and transphobic bullying fact sheet – it's a very important piece of what we were doing – to start to layer in information for the public on how important it was to begin to have this conversation, to use the language, to start to feel comfortable with the idea that we had kids we needed to protect and we weren't protecting them.

We got the pride flag raised at the Legislature for the first time. That was during the Sochi games, if anyone remembers those Olympics in Russia and the conversation around gay athletes and the dangers they faced, the life-and-death dangers they faced. When we got that pride flag raised at the Legislature for the first time, people, gay and straight, said that when they walked by and saw that flag, they knew that the government had their backs. They knew that the government had the backs of their kids, their nieces, their nephews, anyone that was affected by these issues.

We went on to get, through much struggle, the relationship statutes and the Vital Statistics Act, through which became a statutes amendment act. The relationship statutes was removing the preamble to the Marriage Act, that states that marriage is between a man and woman. It was a struggle. It was a struggle because I had colleagues in the Progressive Conservatives who, frankly, even though gay marriage became the law in 2005, were still struggling with it in 2013. We remember then the Vital Statistics Act, removing the need to be 50 per cent of the way through gender reassignment surgery in order to get the gender changed on your birth certificate. That was another piece. These were all struggles. You know, by the time we got to the first conversation in this House on GSAs, we were still struggling with a lot of issues in our PC caucus.

Then came my colleague Kent Hehr's Motion 503. Motion 503 was the first discussion in this House, and our Minister of Education will remember very clearly that conversation; our minister of economic development will as well. And I want to give a shout-out to my colleague across the aisle the Member for Grande Prairie-Wapiti because he is a good man who is supportive of these issues, who walked with me in the pride parade, and who honestly has a good heart. So in any conversation I have, I want to make sure that I have honoured the fact that he is a good man. Motion 503 was definitely a fight in our caucus about whether we supported it or not, and some of us did.

Fast forward, then, to Laurie Blakeman's Bill 202. Bill 202 was one that a number of us had said that we were going to support, and it was a very contentious issue within our caucus. So what our former Premier at the time decided to do was come up with Bill 10, which, once it was on the table, you couldn't discuss Bill 202 anymore because you can't have two bills on the table that are too similar in nature. The reason for the original Bill 10 was a political decision to thwart Bill 202. Let's be very clear. When people are throwing around the accusation that someone put something forward with a political intent to embarrass or to change the conversation, that started in my former caucus, so I find the finger pointing a little bit ironic.

I talked about Bill 10 in terms of my flawed advocacy. I was handed this bill at the last moment because of the work that I had done. I was told to take it forward even though it didn't make gay-straight alliances mandatory in schools. It was flawed, it was discriminatory, it was harmful to kids, and it said to every child in Alberta who is LGBTQ-plus: you're a second-class citizen, and we are putting that in legislation.

I took that bill forward because I was told that I had to be part of a team and that as a team player I was responsible for making sure

that I did my part, and I did. I apologized to the LGBTQ community later because I profoundly disappointed them and many of my mentors, who then told me that they didn't know who I was anymore. It was a moment in my life where I decided that I could either quit politics and be who I was or be a team player and suck it up and take forward this horrifying, homophobic bill that hurt people.

At the end of the day, the bill was pulled because our Premier decided it hurt his brand. Ultimately, it came back – I had no part of the discussion – with mandatory GSAs.

9:10

The lessons I learned in all of this were painful but important ones, and they really were about making decisions not based on your electability but based on your moral and ethical framework. They were painful, but they were important, and they framed how I made my decisions going forward.

Fast-forward to the policy conference where I decided as a progressive politician to run for leader of the Progressive Conservative Party. I thought at the time that I would be able to bring progressive ideas forward, so I went to that policy conference. What happened at that policy conference was that I came to talk about natural gas cogen and a lot of good environment policy and a lot of good energy policy, and the very first thing that happened – and I will table this later – was that Jason Kenney's people, his supporters, came forward in a breakout room of hundreds of people, and they put forward a policy to out gay kids in school. So when Jason Kenney talks about the fact that he doesn't want to legislate on social issues, he doesn't have to because his people put the policy forward for him. The proof is right here.

Jason Kenney's people flooded that policy conference, more than 80 per cent of the people. You can tell by the final vote. You can tell that Jason Kenney's people wanted to talk about outing gay kids in school, and they wanted to talk about abortion. They did not want to talk about anything else. So when he talks about the NDP making social issues divisive, his people made them divisive. His people chose to have that conversation.

They didn't want to talk about making Alberta better. They didn't want to talk about energy policy. They didn't want to talk about anything on the education front but how to make sure that schools had the ability to out gay kids to their parents. That's what they wanted to talk about. And when they chased me up and down the halls and they called me a baby killer, they wanted to talk about abortion. They made it very clear that social issues were exactly what they wanted to talk about. So when Jason talks about members making grassroots policy, I think we can be very clear what that grassroots policy is going to be.

Jason released a statement on Bill 24. It is a dog-whistle document designed to invoke the worst prejudices about the LGBTQ community and about gay-straight alliances. In it he claims to "strongly support efforts to make schools free from bullying," which is an interesting comment to make since he didn't refrain from making the policy conference filled with his supporters free from bullying; the bullying was so intense that I dropped out of the Progressive Conservative leadership race. Is there anyone in this Chamber who thinks for a moment that he is interested in making any space in this province free from bullying? I don't think so.

He said, "Neither I nor anyone in our caucus has proposed 'outing' gay kids" in schools. Well, we know that's not true. Certainly, all you have to do is look on Twitter to see some of the folks across the aisle talk about how they think that's a good idea, so maybe he should have checked with his caucus.

He said, "We believe that highly trained educators are in a much better position than politicians to exercise their discretion." Well, it

was only a month ago that he was excoriating Alberta teachers for indoctrinating their ideology in schools all the way from kindergarten through university, and now all of a sudden those same teachers he trusts enough to decide when a child should be outed in school.

He talks about Bill 24 applying to five-year-olds in kindergarten. You know, this is the equivalent of saying that gay people are child molesters. Because you know what? You put out this vicious, negative kind of messaging, and you ask your followers to get riled up about it. That's what this is designed to do. It is a dog whistle of the most disgusting kind.

You know, I knew from that policy conference that Jason Kenney's base were homophobes – there is no other way to say it – and the best way to get that base riled up, to come out and to vote for you is to signal to them that their thinking is under attack. How do you do that? By making sure that you tell them that – and I quote from Jason's release on the UCP website – "the NDP is trying to do indirectly what it cannot do directly: that is teaching sensitive subjects."

Cortes-Vargas: Like being gay.

Ms Jansen: Like being gay.

You know, Bill 10 was a learning moment for us. Clearly, a lot of people didn't learn from it. But I'll tell you what I learned from it. I decided that I wouldn't at any point in the future after that moment allow a time in this House where I allowed myself to be shut out of a discussion about what's fair and what's right and what is truly Albertan. That's what Bill 24 is.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you, hon. minister.

Are there any other members wishing to speak on Bill 24? The hon. Member for Calgary-West.

Mr. Ellis: Thank you, Madam Chair. I do have an amendment I'd like to present to you.

The Deputy Chair: If you could just wait till I have the original, please.

Mr. Ellis: Absolutely.

The Deputy Chair: Hon. member, your amendment will be referred to as A1. Please proceed.

Mr. Ellis: Thank you, Madam Chair. I'm pleased to rise in Committee of the Whole to move an amendment to Bill 24, An Act to Support Gay-Straight Alliances. Before I continue with my comments, it bears repeating that the United Conservatives unequivocally support GSAs. Members of our legacy caucuses unanimously supported the legislation that gave students the right to form GSAs in their schools.

I stood in this Chamber along with a few people that are here today and, of course, supported Bill 10. I was new to the Chamber at that time, but I can tell you that – and I do agree with the Member for Calgary-North West – it certainly was a learning opportunity, and I, too, believe that I have learned from it as well.

Nobody on our side of the House wants to take that right away. We know the GSAs are an important tool to help support students who may be having difficulties dealing with sexual orientation or gender identity issues and that the peer support provided through a GSA can mean the difference between life and death for these children. We also do not support mandatory notification of GSAs, GSA participation for parents.

In other words, we are certainly not in favour of outing gay kids. This has to be said, Madam Chair, because the members opposite

continue to insist that these are our positions on this issue. Time and time again we have corrected the record, yet they persist in mischaracterizing our beliefs.

Now, it must also be said that opposition to the bill we have before us today does not equal opposition to GSAs. Another piece of misinformation perpetuated by this NDP. While we support elements of the bill, our caucus has identified a number of areas of concern. In particular, I am concerned that section 9 of this bill deliberately or unwittingly erodes parental rights when it comes to the education of their children, which is why I'm proposing to strike section 9 from it in its entirety. Section 9, as it currently stands, provides an exemption from section 50.1(1) of the School Act.

9:20

Section 50.1(1) states:

A board shall provide notice to a parent of a student where courses of study, educational programs or instructional materials, or instruction or exercises, include subject-matter that deals primarily and explicitly with religion or human sexuality.

Madam Chair, it has been a long-standing legal right of parents in Alberta to withdraw their children from religious or sexual health instruction should they see fit to do so. Section 50.1(1) of the School Act guarantees that. Now, the members opposite have spoken at length in this House about how GSAs are simply extracurricular, peer-support, antibullying clubs where students go to eat pizza, hang out, and talk to one another and that nothing even resembling instruction happens there ever. To quote the Premier just yesterday: "GSAs are no more about curriculum than debate club or model UN club or basketball." Some members opposite have spoken passionately about how upsetting it is that we would dare raise it as a possibility. The Premier herself said that the suggestion was "ridiculous."

Fine. I will take the government at its word, but then I can't help but wonder why the government finds it necessary to provide an exemption to section 50.1(1). As far as I can tell, there is no earthly reason for the NDP to legislate an exemption for something that isn't happening in GSAs anyways. Its presence in the bill raises serious questions about the government's intent, and many Albertans are questioning the government's support for the parental rights as outlined in section 50.1(1) of the School Act. I sincerely hope that section 9 is not a way for the government to do after hours what it could not do in the classroom during school hours. [interjections]

The Deputy Chair: Hon. members, let the member speak.

Mr. Ellis: Madam Chair, the presence of section 9 in this bill has caused considerable confusion and anxiety for parents across this province. We have heard from many parents who are wondering what this means for their ability to know when their children are learning about sexuality at schools, which is their right under the law. In fact, the NDP appears to acknowledge this right since they are not repealing section 50.1(1) outright. If GSAs aren't instructing children in any way, there is simply no need to exempt them from this provision. It just doesn't make sense.

Thankfully, there is a simple, common-sense solution to this problem, which is to strike out section 9 from this bill. That would eliminate any doubt or confusion about the government's motivations or intentions when it comes to the parental rights enshrined in section 50.1 of the School Act. It would be a significant improvement to this legislation, and I would urge the government to support it. I would also caution the government to seriously consider the implications of defeating this amendment. Exempting GSAs from being subject to section 50.1(1) of the School Act while at the same time claiming that nothing that would require parents to

be notified under existing law occurs within GSAs is a contradiction so obvious that it invites suspicion.

Did the government seriously think that nobody would notice when they try to legislate something that they say isn't a problem in the first place? What are parents supposed to think when your actions are so out of step with your words? Now is the time for the government to reassure Albertans that they have no intention of coming after their rights as parents. Now is the time for the government to prove that it doesn't have anything up its sleeve.

Once again – and thank you, Madam Chair – I urge the government and all my hon. colleagues in this House to accept our common-sense amendment to Bill 24. Thank you.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you, hon. member.

Are there any members wishing to speak to amendment A1? The hon. Minister of Education.

Mr. Eggen: Thank you for this opportunity, Madam Chair, and thanks for the amendment. I think it's important to clarify why this section is in Bill 24 and the intention of this section as well. I think clarity is important, and what we are ensuring is that there is a differentiation between, first of all, instructional and then clubs, right? The health lessons, for example, are taught in health class – right? – but GSAs are peer-support groups, so there is a clear differentiation there.

You know, part of this provision is because of what we have seen over the last couple of years. It's part of the evolution of building this legislation in order to support kids and to strengthen the situation for GSAs. Some schools have suggested that there's an interpretation of section 50.1 that could be used as a justification to violate student privacy and to notify parents of participation in a GSA. We have seen some of this before, so this is a matter of clarity, right? We've seen some confusion in the past around school boards about whether section 50.1 should apply to voluntary student organizations like GSAs, so with the new proposal that we have before us here, we hope to bring clarity to this matter.

If we do pass this amendment, it's very important that it makes clear that section 50.1, which is intended to apply to instructional time, does not apply to voluntary organizations such as GSAs. Respectfully, that is the intention of this. It's a very important part of Bill 24, so I respectfully reject this amendment and would suggest that all members do consider that.

Thank you.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you, hon. minister.

Are there any other members wishing to speak to amendment A1? The hon. Member for Calgary-Hawkwood.

Connolly: Thank you, Madam Chair. I have to say that it's deeply disappointing that the members opposite continue to peddle dangerous conspiracy theories instead of accepting the simple fact that this is about protecting kids. Rather than standing up for the students who need these groups, the opposition would stand up for the rights – rights teachers do not want – to out gay kids.

Madam Chair, I completely agree with the Minister of Education, and I ask all members of this Assembly to vote against this amendment.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you, hon. member.

Are there any other members wishing to speak to amendment A1? The hon. Deputy Premier and Minister of Health.

Ms Hoffman: Thank you very much, Madam Chair. I'm going to take an opportunity to sort of share some of my experiences through my time on the Edmonton public school board. I'm so proud of the

fact that while we were on the board, we were able to move forward in ensuring that all schools would be safe, caring, respectful environments for students, staff, and their families. A big piece of that was ensuring that students had the right to form GSAs, and another big piece was ensuring that staff knew what their roles and responsibilities were around protecting those children, ensuring that they were well supported and providing opportunities for them to grow.

But the learning experience I want to share was one that actually happened when we were at the Alberta School Boards Association's conference. It was in debate. We brought forward a resolution to expand tenets of the policy that we had on our board to province-wide, and there was a lot of learning that happened on the floor. There were a lot of folks that said things like: "Oh, what's next? A support group for kids who are fat?" or "What's next? A support group for kids who have red hair?" I want to tell you that it is not the same to be struggling with your weight as to be feeling rejected and depleted for who you are and what your life is.

9:30

But the person who helped me learn the most at that moment when we were on the floor debating this was a gentleman I have great respect for. His name is Terry Riley. He's from the fantastic city of Medicine Hat. He came forward to the microphone. Terry is very well spoken and outspoken, and you never truly knew where he was going to stand on an issue until he started going.

To tell you the truth, it was a pretty hot room. Terry came up, and I was, like: oh, I wonder which way he's going to go on this. Terry started speaking from his experience as a teacher, how there were kids in his class that were absolutely bullied for being who they were, who were bullied, called gay, called queer, called everything that could hurt them. He didn't know what their orientation was, and he did not stop that bullying, and sometimes he even participated in it. He said that he did that because he didn't know any better, and he lived with that regret every day of his life since. He said that it was important for us to bring these policies forward because he didn't want any other teacher to live with the guilt of not standing up for a kid who deserved to have them on their side.

This amendment not only puts kids in a really awful position, Again, it puts teachers in a really awful position, puts teachers in a position where they don't know how to move forward, where they don't know how to best act in that role in loco parentis, which is part of their obligations as a teacher.

I have to say that bringing this forward is very, I'd say, disingenuous, but I think it is actually very genuine. I think it speaks exactly to the values of the folks on the other side who are bringing forward this amendment. I don't think they want to protect kids. I don't think they want to stand up for the kids who are most marginalized and vulnerable in our society, students who are statistically far more likely to be living on the streets, far more likely to engage in self-harm. These are some of the kids that are pushed to the margins by a variety of different systems, including sometimes their own schools and their own families, and this is why kids have told us that these groups matter and that they need to be protected and that they need to be supported.

I also want to tell you about one day, walking down the hall of a school in my ward at that time, when I was on the Edmonton public school board. I was walking down the halls of Vimy Ridge academy. It's a fantastic school. They had at that time cadets as well as hockey and dance and all sorts of different programs, outdoor pursuits. I think there are hon. members of this House that have their children going to that school at this very moment.

I want to say that it isn't often that you walk the halls of a school and kids come up and say thank you for a policy you passed, you

know, work that you did around assessment, work that you did around junk food. Not exactly things students come up and say thank you for. But for this policy, in that school, kids came up to me in the hallway and said thank you. They said: "You're making our lives better and safer because you're ensuring that we have the right to be who we are. We can actually show up to school, hang up our coats, go to class, and know that nobody will hold who we are against us."

I think that this amendment and its intent to do the exact opposite, to make kids feel fearful, to make kids have mistrust for the systems that are supposed to be there to support them, speak to the genuine distrust, hatred, disrespect that we've heard from so many members of the other side when it comes to protecting children who are marginalized. And that makes me not just sad. It's not actually shocking, but it is very disappointing. It's not just disappointing for me. It's disappointing for these teachers that are going to be impacted, it's disappointing for the kids who are going to be impacted, and I wonder how many people on that side of the House will not themselves be disappointed when they are in a position where they need to say where they stand on this issue. It will happen over and over again.

Again, the Premier said yesterday: you know, we're really keen to get back to discussing the items of the economy, jobs, petrochemical diversification in this province. There are lots of opportunities for us to engage on this, and bringing forward amendments like this, I think, says that there is an intent on the other side of the House for us to spend more time talking about what our social values are. I'm fine to do that. You brought forward the amendment; we'll rise and speak to it. I will encourage my colleagues to vote in opposition to this because this is absolutely doing the opposite of what, in question period, members opposite said they want to do, which is to talk about those other issues. Instead, they're bringing forward something that is absolutely detrimental to the people of this province. We're going to stand up and we're not going to allow this kind of very direct attack on children to continue.

Again I want to say thank you to Terry Riley for his courageous comments, for working to make Alberta a safer place for teachers and for students. That day will stand out in my mind for many years to come.

There was also another speaker at the mike. I'll keep his name in confidence. He said: you know, if kids didn't want to get bullied for being gay, they should act less gay. It definitely made the news, and there was mixed reaction in the room.

That, to me, is what this amendment says: if kids don't want to be outed, they shouldn't come to GSAs. In my opinion, in our caucus's opinion, in our government's opinion, we are creating these structures so that kids can come, so they can be themselves, so they can be supported, and they can get on with learning math and science and English and all of the other important components in their day knowing that they are respected, that they are protected, and that they will be supported in their schools and their learning environments.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you, hon. minister.

Are there any other members wishing to speak to amendment A1? The hon. Member for Fort Saskatchewan-Vegreville.

Mrs. Littlewood: Thank you, Madam Chair. I just wanted to talk a little bit about some of the news that I was listening to on the radio last night. It was around clarity of rules and why this legislation is important and what it seeks to make more clear.

I know that my experience as an MLA since being elected, as I'm sure with a lot of experiences around the Chamber, is that

sometimes you don't know, when there is an issue, who the first person is that the phone call that you make should be to. When parents contact my office and they have questions and concerns on what's going on in their kids' school, often when they come to me, they're frustrated because they didn't know if they should go to the teacher, they didn't know if they should go to the principal, they didn't know if they should go to the superintendent, or they didn't know if they should go to the school board. Sometimes they don't even know who all those avenues are. Any time that we can make more clear the roles, where responsibility lies for what, I think it's something that acts in the best interest of families, of parents, of students.

Rob Breakenridge, who I was listening to on I think it was 630 CHED last night, was very clear about what the point of the legislation is, that it is to make clear that the responsibility to inform parents is not put on a teacher that is the one that is engaged to make sure that they facilitate these clubs. Like, we're talking about all clubs. That's what this section 9 does. It makes clear that there is curriculum in school and that then there are extracurricular activities outside of school, which are not curriculum, hence extracurricular. The idea that this is somehow to create a wall between parents and their kids: it actually does the opposite. It makes clear what the role of the teacher is and what the role of the parent is.

I know that, growing up, whenever I had issues in my life, if I was starting to date or if I was doing any of those sorts of things that kids learn about themselves and explore as they grow up, I told my dad as I was ready to tell him, because we didn't always agree. I grew up in a really religious household, that often disagreed with how things were in my generation.

I think it's important for parents to know what their role is, that it's the responsibility of the parent to know if they are a member of the Harry Potter club, if they are a member of the mathletes' club, if they are a member of these things that their kids are taking an interest in. The responsibility lies with the parents. It is important to have safe spaces for students that are vulnerable, that have all sorts of really shocking statistics on how hard it is still to navigate this world that has not been built for them to be a truly included part.

9:40

The fact that this section makes clear that it is a parent's responsibility to be involved with their child's life, to be close with them, to be having clear lines of communication is, I think, really important. You know, as an adult talking with my dad, I've made very clear with him – and he understands. He understands that if he didn't know something that was going on in my life, it was his responsibility. He knew that if he was not the first person to know, it was indicative of our lines of communication and not something that was someone else's responsibility.

I think that is why this section is so incredibly important. I would really like to know why the opposition would want to maintain the current way, where that clarity is not there, why the opposition would actually choose a system that puts other bodies in between a parent-child relationship and actually moves that responsibility where it really should not be. That's, I think, what I would like to know from the opposition, Madam Chair.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you, hon. member.

Are there any other members wishing to speak to amendment A1? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Mr. Shepherd: Thank you, Madam Chair. My colleague the Member for Calgary-North West spoke at length this morning about

the legacy of Conservative governments on LGBTQ rights here in this province. This amendment and indeed all of the statements we have been hearing from the opposition on this bill do not stand in isolation. They stand in the context of all of these actions of all of these previous Conservative governments in this province, who have consistently worked to provide loopholes, to continue to allow the promotion of intolerance and bigotry against the LGBTQ community in this province.

The opposition would like to frame this as a question where they'd like to try to put us in a little catch-22. They want to frame this in a way where they can try to say: oh, here's the NDP government again trying to sneak through an ideological agenda. We've seen this disingenuous argument from the Leader of the Opposition, in which he tried to insinuate that GSAs currently are implementing curriculum and trying to circumvent parental rights.

Madam Chair, this is a sideshow. It is a distraction, because they do not want to speak about the truth of this issue, which is, as my colleague from Calgary-North West outlined, that they have investment in individuals who are choosing to take a fearful view of the world, who want to believe that members of the LGBTQ community are trying to circumvent parental rights, who continue to spread misinformation that individuals from this community are actively trying to recruit children or in some way convince them to cross some putative line. This is paranoia. It is not reality, and it is beneath the members opposite and the Leader of the Official Opposition to in any way continue to feed into this false mythology about the LGBTQ community.

This amendment is seeking, once again, to insinuate that this legislation in some way is trying to push through a secret agenda, that we are trying to circumvent parents, that we are trying to work around people's rights. The fact is, Madam Chair, that this needed to be brought into this bill because individuals in different aspects of the school system in this province were actively trying to get around the provisions that were put forward in Bill 10 and the intention of that bill to guarantee that all students in this province have the opportunity to form or join a GSA without question and with privacy. It doesn't matter what nice language they try to dress it up in. They are trying to ensure that those sorts of loopholes and opportunities exist.

Our government will not stand for that, so we are providing in this bill a reasonable step, which makes it one hundred per cent, perfectly clear that GSAs are not curriculum. They are not a political activity. They are not something that has to be reported to parents because parents have some reason to be afraid of them. They are peer support groups that are student led, that provide youth with the opportunity to receive the support they need during a difficult time of their lives and, when they are ready to make the decision, to then come out.

For that reason, Madam Chair, I will not be voting in favour of this amendment.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you, hon. member.

Are there any other members wishing to speak to amendment A1?

Connolly: Before we vote on this amendment, I just have one more thing to say. If the members opposite vote for this amendment, I don't want to see a single one of them at pride next year. If you don't support our community now in this House – in this House now – don't you dare pay us lip service in June.

The Deputy Chair: Are there any other members wishing to speak to amendment A1?

Seeing none, I'll call the question.

[The voice vote indicated that the motion on amendment A1 lost]

[Several members rose calling for a division. The division bell was rung at 9:47 a.m.]

[Fifteen minutes having elapsed, the committee divided]

[Ms Sweet in the chair]

For the motion:

Anderson, W.	McIver	Pitt
Drysdale	Nixon	Smith
Ellis	Orr	Stier
Hunter	Panda	

Against the motion:

Babcock	Hoffman	Miranda
Bilous	Horne	Payne
Carlier	Jansen	Piquette
Carson	Kleinsteuber	Renaud
Ceci	Larivee	Rosendahl
Clark	Littlewood	Sabir
Connolly	Loyola	Schreiner
Cortes-Vargas	Luff	Shepherd
Dach	Malkinson	Sucha
Eggen	Mason	Turner
Fitzpatrick	McCuaig-Boyd	Westhead
Goehring	McKitrick	Woollard
Gray	Miller	

Totals: For – 11 Against – 38

[Motion on amendment A1 lost]

The Deputy Chair: Are there any comments or questions in regard to Bill 24? The hon. Member for Spruce Grove-St. Albert.

Mr. Horne: Yes. Thank you, Chair. You know, this bill falls in line with what is, to me, one of the most moving bills we've passed so far. I had a few friends from high school who had moved here from Nova Scotia. They'd been here for about six years when I first met them, and they still refused to identify as Albertans. Now, I didn't know this at the time, but these friends of mine had an older sibling, and when he came out to their parents, they threw him out. One of those friends later transitioned, and that friend was thrown out as well. This family has been torn apart because their parents are not accepting of this.

If they had joined a GSA and if the previous amendment that was just defeated had passed or if teachers decided that it was within the parents' best interests to inform the parents that their children were joining a GSA, that would have destroyed their household in high school. That is why there are so many homeless LGBTQ2-plus youth not just in this province but across the world, and that is something that I think we have to work to end. This bill is one step in that direction.

I believe it was back in 2015, with the first Alberta Human Rights Amendment Act bill we brought forward, that added protection for gender identity and gender expression, that I got some texts from these friends, and what they said to me is: this is the moment I am now proud to call myself an Albertan. These are people who have lived here for a decade, who until 2015 could not call themselves Albertans and live with that. I am so happy that we are finally moving forward in this direction.

I also was reflecting back on the speeches from my colleagues from Calgary-East and Strathcona-Sherwood Park about their experiences inside of schools and what many policies meant for them, and I was reflecting back again to my own high school experiences, which, as I'm sure most members here are aware, are not nearly as far back as some. I graduated in 2009. One of my

favourite teachers was a social studies teacher. I was fortunate to have advanced placement in my school, and I had this teacher for, I think, four classes when you include European history and world religion, which, surprisingly, under section 50.1(1), my parents didn't need to okay. I'm still unsure how that worked, but it did. My parents were more than happy to talk to me about that class every day, so I don't think they would have been concerned about it if they had been asked for permission.

This teacher would often share stories about his personal life, but it was never "my partner and I"; it was always "we." If he told stories of an individual in his family, it was always his nephew, and the only pictures he had in his classroom were Prime Ministers, the Queen, and his nephew. I clued in fairly early on why that was. Many of my classmates still dispute why that was, but the reason is that section 50.1(1) would not let him talk about his husband. In any other workplace that would be a human rights violation, but the fact that in a classroom we can't talk about the family structure of our teachers, about what they did on the weekend because they might accidentally out themselves is so baffling to me. Now, I realize this bill doesn't address section 50.1(1), and I hope that in the future we look at fixing that.

10:10

But at this moment we're talking about things where there isn't even any curriculum involved. A GSA is something that somebody wants to join. We're not talking about sex ed. We're not talking about a controversial book that an English class wants to read. We're talking about some kids looking for some support from other kids because they are often terrified to talk to anybody else.

You know, there's a group in my constituency – well, they recently moved out of my constituency but only by a block or two – called inQueeries. This is a group that was founded when a constituent of mine, likely a distant cousin – I haven't dug too deep into that; branches of her family married my family – came out to her family and looked around the community and saw that there was no support. The only option for this family to talk to other people her age about their experiences and the challenges they faced was to come into downtown Edmonton on a Tuesday night. It just totally disrupted the entire week. So this family said: okay; we're going to go out and create our own group.

I've met with this group several times. Shortly after their founding, they organized the first St. Albert Pride. I'll give credit where credit is due. Doug Schweitzer actually showed up last year, and so did my Member of Parliament, Michael Cooper, although he wasn't there long. My colleague from St. Albert, the Member of Parliament for Edmonton Centre, and I, the three of us, were there the entire day, as was most of St. Albert council.

The stories that I have heard from youth at events like this are in many cases very touching, in many cases very tragic, and a lot of it comes down to whether or not they feel they have support and whether or not they feel the support that is available is a safe space. People like my friends from high school, who were thrown out of their house when they came out to their parents, would not be able to join a GSA if their parents were informed of it.

This bill is not about curriculum. It's not about trying to keep a secret from parents. It's about trying to protect kids. Not all of the members opposite, to be sure, but the conservatives opposite, anyway, have made it very clear that they don't intend to support this bill. Now, for some of them I think that that's based on a mistaken interpretation of the bill. That's one thing. I sincerely hope that they reach out to youth in their community or even around Edmonton. There are plenty of groups that I'm sure would be more than happy to talk to them, even if it's just to reach out to Dr. Wells,

who lives in St. Albert. I'm sure that somebody will be able to sit down with you and walk you through why this bill is so important.

I seriously hope that everybody in this Chamber supports this bill. I seriously hope that everybody takes a moment to reflect on why it is so important that we provide not just LGBTQ youth but all youth with a safe space to talk about the challenges that they are facing.

You know, Chair, on the other side of my constituency, in Spruce Grove, I'm told that there used to be a GSA and that the students felt that it was no longer necessary, so it just kind of pattered out and died, which is fine. If students feel that they have all of the support they need at the school, that's great to hear. But there was a constituent of mine who had recently transitioned, and they went to Spruce Grove council and said: "Why aren't we flying the pride flag? Why is there no pride celebration here in Spruce Grove? Every other capital region community is doing it. What's happening?" The answer they got wasn't: "Oh. Sorry. This was an oversight." That would have been understandable. Even if they had said, "Sorry; we don't have time this year; it's just not viable; we'll look at it for next year," that would have been fine. The response that they got from the Spruce Grove council was that it was too time consuming for them to raise the flag, to make an official statement, or to tweet about it.

So this constituent decided to organize their own pride, and about 20 people, including the Member for Stony Plain and myself, all joined this individual to throw the first Spruce Grove Pride. There were many people in attendance who had stories much like the member from Lethbridge – I don't recall which one is which – and the minister of environment, who grew up in my community, where not that long ago in the same community that was now saying that they didn't need a GSA, people were terrified to talk about it, were terrified to tell their best friends about their identity or their expression, their orientation.

It is for that reason that even in communities where we've made a lot of progress, we cannot forget that there's still a lot of work to do. We still have teachers who can't talk about their own personal relationships in classrooms, but right now my biggest concern is whether or not we can have youth talk to other youth about the challenges they face and give them a safe space to talk. That can't and won't happen if teachers or the administration choose to or are required to inform parents as soon as youth join a GSA.

In that spirit, I urge all members to support this bill. I urge all members that are on the fence to reach out to community groups in their community and across the province, to consult with the people that this impacts on the ground, with the youth that this impacts on the ground. I hope everybody reflects on that, I hope everybody does that consultation, and I hope that everybody, when it comes to third reading, chooses to support this bill.

Thank you.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you, hon. member.

Are there any other members wishing to speak to the bill?

Ms Fitzpatrick: Madam Chair, I am honoured to stand in support of Bill 24. Now, my comments will be fairly brief because my colleagues have done a fantastic job of NDP-splaining why all aspects of this legislation must be supported. Every student of every school in my constituency and throughout the province has my full respect and support. I absolutely believe that any of those students who join GSAs not be outed. Students who join GSAs are Albertans and citizens who deserve to be and to feel safe, just like every other student. GSAs provide that safe place.

10:20

I've spoken to members of several different school boards over the last year, not specifically about GSAs but, rather, things in

general. I asked them, offhand, if the school normally reported to parents if their children were interested in or participated in the music club. The answer from all was that they did not.

When I went to school, a few years ago, I didn't share lots of things with my parents. I took music lessons – singing, piano, and violin – which my parents paid for and for which I did some extra chores, but I didn't bother to share that I joined both the glee club and the orchestra until I had to stay late at school as we were preparing for the Kiwanis Music Festival or a concert.

I also played sports: basketball, volleyball, and track, or, in fact, any other sport which offered me an opportunity to participate and possibly get out of the class. My parents didn't know until I was participating in an event which required permission. Even then I was hesitant to tell my mom, who often expressed that these were not activities in which girls needed to be participating. I was sure my father would support my participation because he was the one who taught me to play baseball. That was his sport. However, I did need permission to participate in a tournament, so a conversation with both my parents had to occur. I had to present my case.

Eventually my mother recognized the benefits of my being involved. For instance, I became more focused on my academics because I had to have good grades if I was going to continue on the team. Sports also grew my self-confidence. Her opposition ended, and her support was gained. She attended every game or track meet which she could attend. She also attended every concert that I or my siblings participated in. I always felt supported by my parents, but I certainly didn't share everything with them. I certainly didn't talk about the crush I had on so-and-so or other things that I felt were personal. Did you?

I am a mom. I always felt that I had an incredible relationship with my daughters. In fact, they agree that we did and still do have a very great and very supportive relationship. As young children I taught them, in an evolving way, how to make decisions: orange juice or apple juice, *Star Wars* or skating. As they grew, they made more and more decisions for themselves. They made choices, some good, some bad. I supported their decisions no matter what they were. When they were little, they would confirm with me or ask about decisions. As they got older, they needed to confirm less and less with me. However, they still, on occasion, ask my opinion about a decision. I trust my kids to make their own decisions. They are individuals who have learned how to make decisions, and I respect them.

Had there been GSAs when they were in school, I expect they both would have been members to support their friends, because that is the kind of person they are. I would have supported as well.

I stand in support of Bill 24. Thank you.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you, hon. member.

Are there any other members wishing to speak to the bill? The hon. Member for St. Albert.

Ms Renaud: Thank you, Madam Chair. It's been quite an experience listening to people talk about this over the last few days, talk about their lived experience and share stories from constituents, from families, and, most importantly, from children, because I think they are the experts here. They're absolutely the experts.

You know, I was thinking last night that if you had the opportunity to save one child's life, just one, by giving blood or giving money or giving them a place to live or anything like that, I don't think any one person in this Chamber would hesitate. They would not hesitate to do whatever it took to save even just one child's life. Yet we're being told by children and their families that this GSA, the way that it's presented in this legislation, has the potential to save children's lives. This is based on real experience.

This isn't a world view of any kind, like you all like to talk about. This is real. This happens every day.

I'm actually confused as to why people would have a problem with this. You know, I like to kid that it's interesting watching members on the other side because it seems like they conduct themselves some days like they're auditioning for Kenney. I cannot imagine that all of the people on that side that are voting against this, that has the potential to save children's lives, actually believe it. Sometimes you need to do the right thing, and there is no job that is worth sacrificing what you believe or sacrificing the health, safety, or life of a child.

You know, it was horrible to read yesterday online that the Member for Strathmore-Brooks was again pushing this ridiculous narrative that this was about five-year-olds joining GSAs so that they could be part of sex or religion clubs. It's ridiculous. I've come to expect some ridiculous things from that side like the goofy things they say about equalization, whatever – it's a conservative wedge issue, apparently – or their concerns about ranch and farm workers' safety, but this really takes the cake. This is ridiculous, and I wish that Albertans could see what I'm seeing right now, the people across the bench that are just not listening. They're not listening to people who are telling them that GSAs save children's lives.

You know, a couple of weeks ago I attended a ceremony at the University of Alberta where they honoured distinguished alumni, and one of the people who was honoured was Dr. Lorne Warneke. I'm sure some people have heard of him. He is a psychiatrist who specializes in the area of transgenderism. It was amazing – amazing – to listen to his story, not just his personal story of the life and the journey that he's had personally but the ways in which he's been forced to support children and their families that have come to see him. What was really, really neat was sitting in that auditorium and listening to him say that for once he felt hope because he saw a government that was listening, that they were making decisions based on what was right, not based on ridiculous ideology that belongs to another – who knows? – generation, era.

Your children are not your property. They're not. They're their own people, and I think that as parents we work really, really hard to make sure that they find themselves. I find it so offensive that the biggest rationale for not supporting this that you hear from the other side is that it's parental rights first. It's not. It's about the children first. It's always about the children first. Always.

You know, I raised my children – they're adults now – and I think I worked pretty hard to be sure that I didn't just say that they could tell me anything, but I tried to support when they did tell me something so that, you know, my reaction encouraged them to tell me other things. Now, that wasn't always pleasant. There were times they told me things I sort of wished they weren't telling me, but that's the reality. If you're going to be an open parent, you have to walk the talk.

But as open a relationship as we had, there were times when I was not the first person that they spoke to. They spoke to their friends and their peers, and all of us have done that, every single one of us. We've told our friends things that we couldn't yet tell our parents. We've relied on them for support when we felt we couldn't tell our parents for whatever reason. That's how we live and grow. We look at ourselves through the lens of our peers, peers that we see are like us. Why on earth would you jeopardize that relationship by insisting that parental rights trump all? They don't. It's about children first.

10:30

You know, at about grade 6 I couldn't even help my kids with math. I mean, think about that. We're a little bit out of touch as parents. I know that's hard to hear sometimes, but we are. I make

Flintstones references, and my kids go, like: what? It sort of puts you in your place a little bit.

There's a woman that I work with. Her name is Dr. Carol. I won't say her last name. Carol is a gay woman, and I know that she has struggled. As a young person her friends – and I asked her, you know, because I think we are a voice and she is one of my constituents: if you had an opportunity to say anything, what would you say? I just want to read what she said.

Being gay can be a deep fear unlike many others . . . there are so many pressures and messages telling us to be a certain way . . . we all have absorbed these, so much so that kids feel that they're not only different but will be a disappointment to their parents . . . putting ourselves in THEIR position rather than that of parents helps . . . imagine what it would be like to have a safe place to just be . . . without judgement, [without fear] or pressure.

The other point [nobody is] mentioning it's a gay STRAIGHT alliance . . . how wonderful for straight kids to be able to learn to support others as they struggle . . . my gay cousin's straight friend accompanied him through his journey . . . and to his prom . . . and I have heard Nate say that it was a privilege and honour and taught him so much about the good and bad in people . . . Nate is happily married to a woman. And has a child.

That's just a simple message from one person, but I know that if you asked and if you listened, you would hear from your constituents. You would hear from the children. You would hear from families. You know, we cannot begin to address our children's safety and the problem with youth homelessness without dealing with this. When experts are telling you and children are telling you – and they are the experts – that this legislation helps and it helps the way it's written, you need to listen. You need to stand up for what's right.

Thank you.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you, hon. member.

Are there any other members wishing to speak to the bill? The hon. Member for Edmonton-McClung.

Mr. Dach: Thank you, Madam Chair. I'm pleased to rise today to speak to Bill 24. I wanted to make certain it was known that I grew up in the era of 1972-75, in a high school here in Edmonton, where I'm ashamed now to admit that I did nothing as well as all my other classmates did nothing to come to the defence of an individual and his partner in that high school, who either were outed or they actually lived themselves as a couple and did not have any protections that this Bill 24 proposes and that they would have enjoyed under this bill.

It baffles me why the UCP opposition to Bill 24 is so strong right now. They are obviously serving a constituency they believe is worthy of defence, and I find it indefensible. It seems to me they want to return to a different era. They're stuck in the past. It's unfortunate that they respond to this particular constituency rather than showing leadership and saying: look, we're not going to delve into the past; we're going to show leadership on this and really protect the rights of children for their safety and protection.

Perhaps it's telling to look at possibly the motivation or why the UCP is following this direction. I find some of that evidence in an article in the *Sunday Sun* of August 28, 2016. There's a page there where prominent people are asked 20 questions about what they're doing on a Sunday morning. There's a profile there where individuals are asked what they're having for breakfast or what their pet peeve is or if they could have one superpower, what would it be, if they could choose any superpower, out of any in the world, what would it be?

Well, I'll tell you what. On that particular day Mr. Kenney was profiled, and the *Sunday Sun*'s questions that he answered went like

this. As far as his biggest pet peeve is concerned, he said it was “people going slow in the passing lane.” Well, I’ll tell you what. We’ve got a party that’s going slow in the passing lane on this issue if I can say so myself.

The question that’s most important and most telling that Mr. Kenney was asked is: “If you could have one super power, what would it be?” Out of all the superpowers Mr. Kenney could have chosen, guess what he chose? He chose “to be able to go back in time.” Well, guess what? He’s leading his party in that direction. That’s probably one of the reasons that we see him taking this stance and leading his party back in time, getting stuck in time, taking positions which don’t reflect the direction that we are taking forward on this side of the House.

I’ll tell you what. If his pet peeve is having people going slow in the passing lane, what he should do is get the heck out of the way on this issue, vote with the bill, and make sure that he’s not stuck in time so that the majority of the province can move ahead and discuss the pressing issues of the day once we, hopefully, find the passage of this bill completed in this House.

Thank you.

The Deputy Chair: Thank you, hon. member.

Are there any other members wishing to speak to the bill?

Cortes-Vargas: Madam Chair, I’m just wondering if I can get unanimous consent to revert to introductions. My little brother is here, and I would love to ask for unanimous consent.

[Unanimous consent granted]

Introduction of Guests

The Deputy Chair: Hon. member, please continue.

Cortes-Vargas: Thank you very much, Madam Chair. I’d just like to take this moment to acknowledge that my little brother today woke up early with me – he’s been staying with me all week – and I was explaining to him why I’ve been so late coming home every day, and he decided to spend his PD day visiting the Legislature with his older sister. I’m extremely proud of this kid. He is an incredibly wise soul. He has two very older siblings that have lived paths that are very, I guess, ambitious, and sometimes he gets put in the shadows, and I don’t think he should be. He’s an incredible person. I would just like to ask Camilo Cortes-Vargas to rise and receive the welcome of the Assembly.

What’s up, bro?

The Deputy Chair: Thank you, hon. member.

Bill 24

An Act to Support Gay-Straight Alliances

(continued)

The Deputy Chair: We are now on the bill. Are there any other members wishing to speak to the bill? The hon. Member for Strathcona-Sherwood Park.

Cortes-Vargas: Thank you, Madam Chair. I rise today to speak to Bill 24. You know, I’m proud to have family here. I think family has a lot to do with why we’re here, why this process is so important. In fact, it’s been working with families around what it takes to create safe and caring schools and what it takes to create safe and caring environments for kids that has brought me to this Legislature and what continues to motivate me to do this very work. I believe that the bill today that we’re debating has an incredible path in enabling those supportive spaces and making sure that it’s not vague in any way that parental notification is not to go out, effectively outing children if they join GSAs.

I think part of that comes into also understanding that there’s a lot of misrepresentation of what GSAs have been that has been put out there. I know this because people have come to me in my constituency from parent councils, all over the place to ask me, you know, “What would happen in this circumstance?” or “What would happen in this circumstance?” or “It seems to me that this is happening.” And when I explain to them the actual process, they always sit back in their chairs and say: “Oh, that never made it to me. Like, that didn’t come across.” I think that is because of the dog whistling that happens from the opposition and the fact that they continue to elevate conversations that promote discriminatory actions towards LGBTQ, to us individuals. I think it fundamentally is rooted in that.

But I think as we progress as a society . . .

10:40

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

[Ms Sweet in the chair]

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Shaw.

Mr. Sucha: Thank you, Madam Speaker. The Committee of the Whole has had under consideration a certain bill. The committee reports progress on the following bill: Bill 24. 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 Acting Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

Does the Assembly concur in the report?

Hon. Members: Aye.

The Acting Speaker: Opposed? So ordered.

The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Carlier: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I would like to move now that we adjourn for the morning and reconvene at 1:30 this afternoon.

[Motion carried; the Assembly adjourned at 10:41 a.m.]

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