



Province of Alberta

The 29th Legislature
Third Session

Alberta Hansard

Wednesday morning, December 6, 2017

Day 62

The Honourable Robert E. Wanner, Speaker

Legislative Assembly of Alberta
The 29th Legislature

Third Session

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Deputy Government Whip
Woollard, Denise, Edmonton-Mill Creek (NDP)
Yao, Tany, Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo (UCP)
Vacant, Calgary-Lougheed

Party standings:

New Democratic: 54 United Conservative: 26 Alberta Party: 2 Alberta Liberal: 1 Progressive Conservative: 1 Independent: 2 Vacant: 1

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Kazim	Woollard
Kleinstauber	

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

9 a.m.

Wednesday, December 6, 2017

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

Prayers

The Deputy Speaker: Good morning.

Today is the National Day of Remembrance and Action on Violence against Women. Let us reflect not only on the 14 young women who lost their lives 28 years ago in Montreal but on the powerful movement of women world-wide who are standing against acts of misogyny, violence, and hatred. Together we can create a province and a nation where love, acceptance, and tolerance are stronger than hatred.

Please be seated.

Orders of the Day

Government Bills and Orders Second Reading

Bill 32

An Act to Strengthen and Protect Democracy in Alberta

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Labour and minister responsible for democratic renewal.

Ms Gray: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. It's a privilege to move second reading of Bill 32, An Act to Strengthen and Protect Democracy in Alberta.

With this bill we are continuing our work to renew democracy to Albertans. We started this work soon after being elected by banning political donations from unions and corporations, and we followed up on that work with the Fair Elections Financing Act to help ensure that good ideas are valued above campaign budgets and that the interests of everyday Albertans are put first.

Earlier this year the Legislative Assembly passed the Public Interest Disclosure (Whistleblower Protection) Amendment Act to further the principles of open government in Alberta by increasing accountability, ethics, and transparency, and now we are proposing amendments to the Election Act and the Election Finances and Contributions Disclosure Act.

Bill 32 would strengthen the existing third-party advertising rules by extending spending limits to three months before the election period. Starting December 1, prior to an election year individuals, corporations, unions, employee groups, or other third parties would not be permitted to spend more than \$150,000 on political advertising prior to the election being called. Of that \$150,000, no more than \$3,000 could be used to promote or oppose the election of one or more candidates in any one electoral division. Money spent on canvassing and organizing events to promote or oppose a party, nominee, candidate would be considered advertising expenses. Political parties, nominees, and candidates would also be prohibited from colluding with third parties such as political action committees to circumvent spending rules.

Corporations, unions, employee groups, and similar third parties that are not individuals would be banned from incurring expenses to sell memberships, fund raise, or collect information about voters in support of a party, nominee, or candidate. By doing more to keep corporate and union money out of politics, these proposed changes would help ensure that everyone has an equal opportunity to share their views and meaningfully participate in an election.

Our government has also previously committed to prohibiting MLAs from using government resources during an election. Bill 32 includes restrictions on advertising or publishing any information about government programs or activities after the writ has been issued for a general election. At the same time, it is imperative that the public service be able to provide Albertans with the information they need about ongoing programs and services. Our proposed amendments are aimed at prohibiting taxpayer money from being used to influence elections but also avoiding a total shutdown of all government communications to the public. Advertising or announcements required by law would still proceed, as would those needed for procurement or employment purposes. Health or public safety messages would also be permitted.

For by-elections there would be restrictions on advertising or publishing information that disproportionately involves or affects the electoral division in which the by-election is taking place. That way, the scale and scope of the advertising rules will concur with the scope of the election taking place.

To help ensure these rules are followed and that complaints are thoroughly investigated, a new election commissioner would be responsible for fully investigating complaints, taking enforcement action, and recommending prosecutions. The election commissioner's annual report would include information on the number and types of complaints received, investigations conducted, and the disposition of each complaint or investigation, and we propose that that new election commissioner be an officer of the Legislature and report to this Assembly.

On another note, we are also proposing to make voting in a provincial election easier and more convenient than ever before. Up to this point for both advance polls and for regular polls Albertans needed to be close to home to vote. In all provincial elections so far people have had to cast their vote at a polling station in their electoral division. We are proposing that on any advance voting day Albertans should be able to vote at the polling station closest to them no matter where they are in the province. Voters would still choose a candidate running in the electoral division where they live, but they would have more freedom in terms of where to vote and how to plan their day. This means that if you live in the suburbs and work downtown, you'd be able to potentially vote during your lunch break on an advance voting day without driving all the way back to your neighbourhood.

We're also giving Albertans more opportunities to fit voting into their schedules by allowing for one more advance voting day and putting that advance voting day on a Saturday, where we know we have the highest turnout and people find it easiest to come out and vote.

In addition to opening up more advance voting opportunities, the bill is also going to allow Elections Alberta to hold more mobile polls. Currently they can only be held in supportive living facilities and treatment centres on election day. We are proposing that mobile polls must also be held in emergency shelters and support centres for those experiencing homelessness or poverty as long as there are at least 10 eligible voters who are getting support there.

Voting is a fundamental right in our society, and we want to make sure that voting is accessible in Alberta. Our legislation will also enable Elections Alberta to establish special mobile polls elsewhere, maybe a postsecondary institution, work camp, correctional institution, or other public buildings. Elections Alberta would be required to determine in consultation with an official from each postsecondary institution, work camp, or other facility if a special mobile poll makes sense for that facility and if there are the supports that are needed: power, space, et cetera.

We also believe that everyone is entitled to vote with privacy and dignity, and that is why Bill 32 would enable Elections Alberta to

use voter assist terminals in general elections. Currently if someone needs help voting due to a disability, a friend or an elections official would help them, but voter assist terminals let voters mark their ballot using a Braille-coded keypad, audio cues, or breath-operated devices. Voter assist terminals have been successfully tested in advance polls in by-elections. It would be an offence to tamper with or interfere with this equipment, and they would not be connected to the Internet. They will create a paper ballot.

Not only do we want to make it easier and more straightforward for people to vote; we also want to encourage more people to vote. Voting is one of the best ways for Albertans to voice their opinion on government and democracy, but Alberta has rarely seen voter turnout above even 60 per cent. To help change this, we want to ensure Albertans are aware of their right to vote and how to exercise it. Our proposed legislation will make it mandatory for Elections Alberta to provide information to the public about the elections process and their right to vote. There would be a specific requirement to implement public education and information programs to make the electoral process better known to the public, particularly to those persons or groups most likely to experience difficulties in exercising their democratic rights.

Elections Alberta will be required to prepare educational materials for students who have reached voting age or who will reach voting age soon, including information about how to have their information added or removed from the register of electors. Albertans who are in the 18- to 24-year-old range are the least likely to vote, and only approximately a third of them are registered to vote, which is by far the lowest of all age groups. To help address this, we are proposing that Elections Alberta be allowed to collect information about 16- and 17-year-olds without their express consent so that they can be automatically registered to vote when they turn 18. Elections Alberta would be required to inform young people added to the register in this manner that they may object to and request to be removed from the register. This provision would not come into force until proclamation.

We also believe that when Canadian citizens move to our province, they should be eligible to vote in a provincial election right away provided they are of voting age. Currently even if they are otherwise eligible to vote, new Albertans have to wait six months before they're able to vote in a provincial election. Many Albertans start contributing to their local communities and economy the day they move here. Therefore, we are proposing to remove the minimum residency requirement. Voters would still need to be ordinarily resident in Alberta in order to vote. They would still need to be a Canadian citizen and 18 years of age or older. By removing this barrier for Canadian citizens, we hope to engage new Albertans in the democratic process sooner and encourage them to continue voting into the future. I would note that this mirrors how our federal government allows voting.

9:10

On another note, it's currently the case that a person who is unable to go to an advance poll or regular poll due to a specified criterion such as a physical incapacity, absence from electoral division may request a special ballot. Unfortunately, given our short writ period there's often not enough time for applications to be processed, for ballots to go out, for someone to complete that ballot and return it by mail. To address this, we are proposing that we allow people to apply for special ballots as early as January 1 of that election year. Special ballots would then be mailed out to electors as soon as the writ is issued.

While making voting easier, we are also proposing to enhance the efficiency of elections and ensure they can run more smoothly. The Election Act currently does not allow Elections Alberta to

change polling place hours even in the event of a disruption or emergency. We're proposing that in the event of a local emergency, a blackout or a burst pipe, the Chief Electoral Officer should have the authority to adjourn voting at that polling place to later in the same day or perhaps change the polling place location. According to our proposed amendments if the emergency is more serious and voting cannot take place on the same day, the CEO can then apply to the court to discontinue the election in one or more electoral divisions and hold the election at another time and place. The election would have to be held within six months, and ultimately the timing would depend on the seriousness of the emergency at hand.

In closing, Madam Speaker, the pillars of our plan are: encouraging more people to vote, making it easier to vote, ensuring elections run smoothly, and protecting the fairness and integrity of elections. If Bill 32 passes, this would be the most significant update to the Election Act since 1980. This is a very comprehensive bill, and while I've covered all of our major proposals, I encourage all of my colleagues to read through the bill to see the full suite of proposed amendments. I look forward to hearing what my colleagues in the Legislature have to say.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: Any other members wishing to speak to the bill? The hon. Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills.

Mr. Cooper: Thank you. Good morning, Madam Speaker. It's a pleasure to see you this morning. It's a pleasure to be here on this fine December morning, just a couple of days before the House was intended to rise, and here to debate a very, very significant piece of legislation. As the minister has just said, it is wide ranging, covering significant portions of how our democracy runs here in the province of Alberta, and let me just say that there are a number of things in this big piece of legislation that I think are steps in the right direction. I think there are a number of things that the government has done to move the needle on access to voting, and I look forward to being able to speak positively about some of those things.

Having said that, there are some significant challenges within Bill 32 that I also hope to be able to address over the next number of days as we debate it here in the Assembly and then speak about this piece of legislation as we move through the legislative process and provide some what I believe will be positive alternatives to in fact further strengthen Bill 32.

You know, Madam Speaker, you have heard me in this House before rise about some concerns that I often have with the way that the government chooses to run the legislative session, and here we have another perfect example of that, of the government not being ready or prepared for the legislative session and then, as such, rushing through what I would consider to be very important pieces of legislation towards the dying days of that legislative session.

I think Bill 32 is a great example of that. Here's a piece of legislation that two days ago was introduced in the House, and the government was rushing to do that, rushing so much that they didn't yet have the actual piece of legislation back from the printers. They provided all members of the Assembly this photocopied version of the legislation. Then, like the good environmental stewards they are, the following day, Tuesday, they provided the actual copy to the House.

While I appreciate their desire to ensure that all members of the Assembly have the appropriate version, it's unfortunate to me that they went through the process of rushing this legislation into the Chamber and not doing the due diligence in terms of having this ready at the beginning of the session so that we could have studied it, so that we could have taken it to Albertans and actually got

feedback from them. Instead, on Monday they rushed this copy into the House, stapled together in the backrooms or the gallows, if you will, of the Legislative Assembly building, and then on Tuesday provided another copy, that's actually returned from Queen's Printer and is the way that we would expect legislation to be introduced into the House.

It continues to be frustrating that the government doesn't seem to quite get how this place works. They continue to rush legislation. They continue to not provide the sort of respect and time that this type of legislation deserves. You would think, Madam Speaker, that after a couple of years they would catch on that this is what happens, that every spring we come, we debate legislation, and that every fall we do it again. They could be prepared for that.

I remain frustrated that this is what happens at the end of each session. I know that the good people of Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills would like to be able to provide some feedback on Bill 32 as this particular legislation has a direct impact on many of them. It's disappointing that three days prior to the scheduled end of the session this sort of piece of legislation would be introduced. Now, at best, if I was speculating, we'll have one weekend in the constituency prior to the passing of this legislation, making the assumption that that's what the government continues to choose to do.

I find that the irony is significant. We're talking about a piece of legislation that has the title An Act to Strengthen and Protect Democracy in Alberta, yet we're virtually going to have no time to ask any Albertans if they support it or think that the government has gotten it right. It seems a bit rich to me that the minister of democratic reform and renewal – apologies if I haven't gotten the name exactly correct – isn't actually going to do anything to take this piece of legislation to Albertans and get some feedback and comments from them.

Having said all that, there are some positives in Bill 32 that I think, overall, will be net positive to the process, but any time that we are making changes to these very important acts, these changes shouldn't be taken lightly. The government is certainly taking steps to modernize the election process, and for that I am thankful. I support that. In particular, the use of voter assist terminals, the use of mobile polling stations as well as expanding the advance polls: I think that these can be a real net positive. Now, that's not to say that those things don't come with some unique challenges, and frankly I don't think that the government has considered all of those unique challenges and what their decisions are going to mean for Elections Alberta.

I had the opportunity to speak briefly with the Chief Electoral Officer yesterday, and in fact I wrote him a letter because I am hoping that we can receive some feedback from the Chief Electoral Officer directly. I don't mean through the minister, but I mean directly from the Chief Electoral Officer. He has a very important role to play in this process, as you know. In some of my conversations with him he identified right off the hop some challenges around the vote anywhere advance polls. That's not to say that these challenges can't be overcome, but I want to make sure that the government has done everything that they can do to make sure that those challenges are mitigated, and at this point in time I don't believe that that is the case.

9:20

When it comes to advance polls, even if we look at something as small as the how and where to vote card, it will not be possible for Elections Alberta to issue how and where to vote cards prior to the opening of advance polls. That does present a unique challenge and is certainly a significant departure from how our democracy has worked in the past, so we should be asking ourselves: is that okay?

How important is getting the information to Albertans about where actually to vote in advance polls? I understand that they're going to be able to vote in any electoral district in any spot in the province, but, you know, the electoral district of Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills, for example, will be at the time of this next election approximately 10,000 square kilometres and may have one, two, possibly three places to vote in the advance polls.

It would be important for the people of Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills to be able to identify where those locations would be, but it's not going to be possible for Elections Alberta to inform Albertans prior to the start of advance polls. There are some challenges that need to be addressed, and I hope that the minister will be able to do that. You know, I think one way that we could ensure that we have feedback from the Chief Electoral Officer, of course, would be to send this bill to committee and have him be able to come and speak about some of these very specific challenges.

You know, Madam Speaker, there are a number of real challenges inside this legislation. I appreciate that the government is trying to make this bill and our democracy stronger, but we need to ask ourselves some questions about what's important to us as Albertans with respect to voters. I for one have some concerns around the total elimination of a six-month residency period. I appreciate that six months is way too long and that when people arrive in Alberta, they should be able to take part in the democratic process, but going from a residency requirement of six months to zero I don't believe is a step in the right direction. I know that just in the last couple of days I've spoken to a bunch of folks around the precinct as well as a number of constituents. I have a number of constituents across the constituency of Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills that I would say act, if you will, as the chair of the coffee senate.

The coffee senate, Madam Speaker – I know that you'll know, being from a rural riding – takes place in a lot of small communities all across rural Alberta. For example, in the community of Linden it's at Country Cousins at 10 a.m., with the best peanut butter pie money can buy every day of the week. I encourage you, if you're ever in the area, to stop by and join the coffee senate in Linden. At Three Hills it's at 3 o'clock at the Get 'n Go every day of the week. In the community of Olds the coffee senate is at the A&W between 7 and 8.

My point is that I've reached out to some of these folks at the coffee senate and spoke to them specifically about Bill 32, and they also share a significant concern around reducing the residency requirement from six months to zero. I look forward to being able to try and represent those folks with some amendments at committee that will still encourage new Albertans to be a part of the process but also with some reasonable requirements around residency, perhaps 30 or 60 days.

You know, I'd like to thank the government for taking some proactive steps on the prohibition around government advertising. I'd also like to thank my hon. colleague from Drumheller-Stettler, who has been working on this project over a number of years. Unfortunately, the government didn't listen to him and to many members of this Assembly when they recommended this change in the form of Bill 203, private member's business, that was introduced here in the House and then killed by the government and then revived by the government and then sent to committee and then killed again. Now it seems that Bill 203 is like a cat with nine lives and has found its way into this piece of legislation, so I would like to say thank you for that.

Having said that thank you, there are enough loopholes in the proposed direction that you could drive a giant government advertisement through it, and I don't think that that is a step in the right direction. I certainly appreciate the fact that the government needs to continue to be able to advertise, even during an election,

on issues of important public health or safety, on issues required by law like employment and procurement, but there's no reason to be making government announcements in a by-election in the same city, at the very least. I'm of the opinion that a school in Edmonton can wait to be introduced 28 days while there's a by-election in Calgary. So I look forward to proposing some amendments around this very important issue with respect to government advertising as well.

The minister spoke about the establishment of an independent officer of the Legislature with the election commissioner. While it is important that we ensure that we have the appropriate checks and balances within our electoral system, adding an independent office of the Legislature I do not believe is the right path forward with respect to the independent election commission. If, in fact, the government would like to have an independent election commissioner, there is no reason why this commissioner cannot function within the confines of the chief electoral office.

This happens in other places across the country, and I'm sure that we're going to hear from the minister touting the benefits of an independent election commissioner within the province of Manitoba, a province where good portions of the NDP world view have come from, and as such, they like to point to it as a real pinnacle of NDP thought, so they like to do some of the things that they've done there. One significant difference between Manitoba and what they're proposing here is that the independent election commissioner in Manitoba actually reports to the Chief Electoral Officer and works inside the confines of that office, not as an independent office of the Legislature.

There are some significant challenges with making it an independent office of the Legislature. I know that the Member for Edmonton-Centre has expressed some concerns about the additional costs that come along with independent officers of the Legislature, particularly when there were individuals advocating on behalf of people with disabilities. He said that he also would like to observe that

there are other costs that also come with appointing an independent officer of the Legislature. For example, in appointing a new independent officer of the Legislature, we've had to go through a significant search process, which has involved a number of meetings with committee members... involved having to take time and go off-site and book rooms off-site.

He continued and said:

It involves extra time where the legislative office's staff has to be involved [with] that process, hiring an external HR firm.

He identified a lot of additional costs that come along with an independent office of the Legislature.

Also, with respect to seniors there was some desire of folks in the Assembly to have an independent seniors' advocate, and many people spoke out against that because of the additional costs. Now, having an independent election commissioner is not necessarily a bad thing, but there's no reason why it needs to function outside of the Chief Electoral Officer, and I look forward to discussing that further later on.

One of the other surprising things – and I think it's important, worth noting – is that this piece of legislation, Bill 32, does a lot of administrative tasks with respect to the abolition of the Senatorial Selection Act. That was the act that Albertans used to vote for Senators. Albertans were very proud to be able to elect Senators, and Albertans from all across the province engaged in a process of electing Senators. Those individuals were then later appointed by the Prime Minister, but he appointed those folks because he respected Albertans' choice with respect to the Senate election. So

I was surprised to see in Bill 32 that all of the references to the Senatorial Selection Act were being removed.

9:30

So I started doing some looking around, and as it turns out, Madam Speaker, under the cover of darkness last December this government let the Senatorial Selection Act lapse. It had a sunset clause in it. [interjections] The government might be clapping, but I can assure you that Albertans appreciated the fact of electing senators because the vast majority – the vast majority – of Albertans don't hold the NDP world view and believe that senators should be elected. Well, this government might like to clap that under the cover of darkness they allowed a piece of legislation that Albertans believed in to lapse. That is not what Albertans are hoping for. I can assure you of that. The purpose of a sunset clause in legislation is to bring it back to the Assembly to decide if this is the best path forward for Albertans. But the NDP knew that Albertans would be disappointed with the decision of letting Senator elections lapse, so they didn't bring it back to the House.

They say they respect democracy, but they don't. This government, Madam Speaker, has a long track record of saying one thing and doing another. They say they want to strengthen democracy, but they don't. They have weakened democracy by removing the ability to elect Senators in the province of Alberta, and I can tell you that the vast majority of Albertans will agree with me and not with that government.

Madam Speaker, there is going to be extensive discussion on this particular piece of legislation. While there may be some upsides, there is a lot – a lot – of work to do, and I know that colleagues on this side of the House who believe in respecting and strengthening democracy are excited about doing that work, and we will be here as long as it takes.

The Deputy Speaker: Any other members wishing to speak to the bill? The hon. Member for Airdrie.

Mrs. Pitt: Thank you, Madam Speaker. It's a pleasure to rise today to speak to Bill 32 in second reading. I hold Bill 32 in my hand right now. It's a fairly large piece of legislation that was put on my desk, this second copy yesterday, the original rushed paper copy only just a few days prior to that. You know, there's a lot in this piece of legislation to go through and to sift through. Unfortunately, I have had very little time to consult on this piece of legislation whereas I imagine that there are many involved, interested parties that are also still sifting through this very large, extensive piece of legislation.

Madam Speaker, at first glance there are some really good points, pieces in this legislation that I do believe will strengthen democracy here in Alberta, and there are also some really concerning pieces. You know, one just off the top of my head that I was initially quite shocked at was the creation of an election commissioner. I believe it was maybe just a little over a year ago when members in this Legislature asked for an independent office for the Seniors Advocate and an independent office for a disabilities advocate. Both of those ideas were actively shot down by the government on the other side of this House, citing that it was too expensive. So I find it interesting, now that we talk about elections here, that we have another independent office being created from this piece of legislation, yet very little thought or consideration was given to our seniors and persons with disabilities in this province. I find it quite shocking, to be honest.

It's also shocking that this is the NDP government's third attempt yet to change election laws in this province.

Mr. Gill: How many?

Mrs. Pitt: Three times we've been here with large pieces of legislation where this government claims that they are trying to strengthen democracy in this province. I think they've failed on many accounts.

Madam Speaker, there have been some successes, I believe, in strengthening democracy and accountability in this province.

On three separate occasions the government puts forward massive pieces of legislation with sweeping changes, allows very little time for consultation, and forces through legislation in the dying days of the fall session, so close to Christmas, with very little time to consult. This isn't very democratic, yet we have An Act to Strengthen and Protect Democracy in Alberta. I have some major concerns with what we're doing here in this House. I think Albertans have major concerns with what is happening here in this House.

Madam Speaker, there was an emergency committee meeting called just a few weeks ago where the government called in the Chief Electoral Officer and pretty much only asked questions around the investigation of the Chief Electoral Officer. Some members actually didn't understand the questions that they were asking when further clarification was needed, yet they read the questions they were given all around the investigating powers of the Chief Electoral Officer, and that was the meeting. It was very, very strange, very, very odd.

I now know why. The government knew, obviously, I would say, pieces of what is in this bill. It's very clear that they weren't ready with the legislation, but they certainly had a focus in that meeting to be – I don't know if they got the answers in this committee meeting that would argue the case for making some of these changes in the legislation. I don't think they did. Every investigation that's been reported to the Chief Electoral Officer has been investigated. Every complaint that has been reported has been investigated by the Chief Electoral Officer, yet the NDP feels that it's important to create a whole other department.

When we asked for independent officers for the seniors and for persons with disabilities, it was cited that this would cost at least \$1 million. So it would be safe to assume, from the information that the government has cited in previous sessions in this Legislature, that the election commissioner would also cost Albertans at least \$1 million if not more.

Madam Speaker, one of the other things that happened in the Legislative Offices Committee with the Chief Electoral Officer, in the presentation that he gave to us, was around the door-to-door enumeration. He fairly clearly stated that the door-to-door enumeration is a thing of the past. It's expensive. It's dangerous – multiple injuries were reported by the door-to-door people doing the enumeration, insults – yet the government is choosing to go down this route. They're choosing to put people in danger even though it's very clearly stated that this is not the way to go, choosing to spend hundreds of thousands of dollars more . . .

Mr. Cooper: Millions.

Mrs. Pitt: . . . millions of dollars more on something that has already been identified as just not working.

Madam Speaker, this government is choosing to continue to do the things that have proven to not work in the past, and the evidence is there – it's very, very clear – from the Chief Electoral Officer.

An Hon. Member: Show me the evidence.

Mrs. Pitt: The government says: "Show me the evidence." Well, ask the Chief Electoral Officer. I would hope that at least the government did that before they tabled this legislation. I imagine they did. And if you were in the committee meeting for Legislative

Offices, he very clearly stated the facts around door-to-door enumeration. I suggest you get a copy of the committee meeting.

Madam Speaker, given the government's third attempt at trying to get democracy right in this province – unsuccessfully, I might add, because this is the third time in just two and a half years – and given the enormity of this legislation and the lack of consultation time that this government has provided to us, I propose to move an amendment.

9:40

Mr. Cooper: Oh. A surprise.

Mrs. Pitt: Madam Speaker, I'll wait till you tell me to proceed. It's a shocker.

Mr. Cooper: Spoiler alert.

Mrs. Pitt: Spoiler alert.

Mr. Cooper: It's a committee referral.

Mrs. Pitt: Hey, you just took away the surprise element.

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. members, this will be known as amendment REF1.

Go ahead, hon. member.

Mrs. Pitt: Okay. Thank you, Madam Speaker. I will read this into the record. I move that the motion for second reading on Bill 32, An Act to Strengthen and Protect Democracy in Alberta, be amended by deleting all of the words after "that" and substituting the following:

Bill 32, An Act to Strengthen and Protect Democracy in Alberta, be not now read a second time but that the subject matter of the bill be referred to the Standing Committee on Legislative Offices in accordance with Standing Order 74.2.

Madam Speaker, I along with members of my caucus and the United Conservative Party have expressed many times on many different pieces of legislation that they be referred to a committee, where committee work can be done, where witnesses can be brought in, and where, especially in this case, the government can hear yet again from the Chief Electoral Officer that, specifically, door-to-door enumeration is expensive and dangerous, which I think is something they very clearly need to hear.

Not only that; the age limit has changed, so we're going to be hiring younger people to do more dangerous work. Unbelievable. I would think that the first rule of government is to do no harm, but in fact this will do quite the opposite, especially to those quite young who are just trying to make a buck, \$15 an hour.

It's important, Madam Speaker, that the government hears of the effects of its changes, especially in regard to a \$15-an-hour minimum wage. It's a massive increase to the budget of the Chief Electoral Officer. Now it's going to be even more because they're going to have to hire even more people to do the door-to-door enumeration, which also means that we will now go back to committee to approve a new budget for the Chief Electoral Officer and the new election commissioner, plus there will be a hiring process and those types of things. I'm not sure they have enough time.

An Hon. Member: Appoint.

Mrs. Pitt: Oh, wait. Oh, wait. They will appoint. This government doesn't believe in elections anymore.

Madam Speaker, I also believe, because, as I've stated before, this is the third time that we are here changing legislation that is to protect and strengthen democracy here in Alberta, that the

government could probably get something right in committee and then come back with only one more piece of legislation to strengthen and protect democracy here in Alberta instead of continually coming back here, in the dying days of session, with a very large piece of legislation, asking us to rubber-stamp it, pass it through: “Don’t worry. We know what’s best. Trust us. We’re the government.” It’s unbelievable. The third time.

Perhaps if the first piece of legislation that this government put forward to strengthen and protect democracy went to committee, the government at that time might have realized that they were missing a whole bunch of stuff or that they were putting too much stuff in. That’s the kind of work that gets done in committee. That’s why committee is important. That’s why I am moving a motion to put this bill in committee, the Legislative Offices Committee, where it can be properly debated, where perhaps we can help this government finally get something right.

Albertans expect us to do important things in this Legislature, but after the government’s third attempt to try and strengthen democracy, I think some Albertans would be a little bit concerned about what we’re doing here in this Legislature. I certainly am, but I’ll have very little time to actually talk to Albertans because of the length of time that this government actually gives to debate and democracy in this Legislature. It’s frustrating.

Our stakeholders are frustrated, Madam Speaker. I can imagine that the Chief Electoral Officer is going to be extremely frustrated. I imagine he was when he read this bill and said: “Wait a minute. I already told you that door-to-door enumeration is a thing of the past. It’s too expensive, and it’s dangerous. I already told you that. Not only that, but I’m going to need some more money to do this should this be the way that the government is choosing to go.”

I imagine it will be because, as history has taught me just in the short time that I have been an MLA, this government is not willing to work with opposition members. I would also infer that this government is not willing to work with Albertans. Their history on consultation is atrocious. They act more like dictators to the people of this province. “Here’s what I have, and I’m going to tell you this is what’s good for you.”

This government, Madam Speaker, refuses to listen to reasoned debate. They refuse to actually debate themselves most of the time. This is a come-and-be-told type of government. They accept very few recommendations, the government, very few. I’m waiting for an amendment to be accepted by this government, certainly a reasonable amendment, like the one I’m suggesting here today, that would refer this piece of legislation to the Legislative Offices Committee. It’s important that we protect democracy here in this Chamber. It’s important that we debate.

It’s important that we take the time to bring this back to Albertans, ask them what they think. They might say that this is great. Wouldn’t this government want the seal of approval on their legislation from the majority of Albertans? That would be what I would effort to do if I were in government, Madam Speaker. That is what I will do when I’m in government in 2019. I will make sure that I bring forward the voice of the majority of the people here in Alberta because that’s responsible – it’s absolutely responsible – and I wish that this government would feel the same way when it comes to democracy here in this Chamber and in this province.

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: Standing Order 29(2)(a) allows for five minutes of questions and answers to the previous speaker should any member wish to take advantage of that. Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills.

Mr. Cooper: Thank you, Madam Speaker. It’s a pleasure to rise. I’d just like to thank my colleague for her comments with respect to some of the recommendations that the Chief Electoral Officer made with respect to door-to-door enumeration and how ineffective it is yet how committed the government is to spending approximately \$11 million on that very project. It seems to me that the government is intent on spending significant amounts of money on tasks that don’t have very good returns.

Another one of those tasks is the independent election commissioner, as I remarked in my comments earlier, this discussion around the independent office of the Legislature and how the independent election commissioner would add significant cost. Of course, in this particular piece of legislation it doesn’t lay out what those costs would be, but we know that independent legislative offices – for example, the youth advocate is about \$14 million. The Member for Calgary-North West mentioned on Bill 205, the Advocate for Persons with Disabilities Act:

Now, with a price tag like the Child and Youth Advocate’s of about \$14 million – that’s a pretty big price tag for an advocate, so I thought to myself: well, in this current economic climate how do we move these issues forward when the resources don’t seem to be there to put an independent office into place?

9:50

You know, Madam Speaker, I appreciate the fact that democracy costs and we need to have checks and balances, but the government seems intent on spending money on door-to-door enumeration, which doesn’t actually make things better, and on creating an independent legislative office. When it came to an independent leg. office for seniors and an independent leg. office for persons with disabilities, they didn’t see value in that, or they felt that the current structure of government could suffice. Yet with the independent election commissioner they have a very different opinion.

I’m curious to know if my colleague from Airdrie shares my opinion that having an independent election commissioner might be a good idea but inside the confines of what already exists. The Chief Electoral Officer, Madam Speaker, as you’ll know, already has all of the abilities that the independent office would, but we’re just going to do it for twice as much money. This does sound like the type of project that this government likes.

I’ll just conclude my thoughts with some remarks from the Member for Edmonton-Shepherd – sorry. The Member for Edmonton-Centre. They’re kind of interchangeable there. He does such a great job, so maybe it should be named after him someday.

I think, Madam Chair, we have many resources that are already available and in existence within the Legislature, within the mechanisms of government. Indeed, some of those are independent officers of the Legislature. A disability advocate will have the opportunity to establish their office, to draw on the resources that are available, and to collaborate with some of the other individuals that serve the people of Alberta to begin to lay the foundation and the groundwork to truly be able to support those who are in need in our province.

My question to my colleague is: are you also confused by how the government wants to do some things in some circumstances but not in others like they’re trying to do with an independent election commissioner, remove them from the chief electoral office and cost . . .

The Deputy Speaker: Any other members wishing to speak to the referral amendment? The hon. Member for Calgary-Hawkwood.

Connolly: Well, thank you very much, Madam Speaker. It’s my pleasure to rise on the referral amendment. I just want to iterate that this bill is about accountability. Now, the opposition is obviously

just stalling because they want to keep Jason Kenney's dark money in politics and continue to use the funds from their PACs in order to fund their elections, but members on this side of the House are making sure that our democracy is accountable to our electors and accountable to all Albertans.

Now, the members opposite may have a short memory, but we have already had a committee about this bill filled with consultation. During the elections and accountability committee we had hundreds of Albertans come forward to tell us what they wanted to see changed in the Election Act, and that's exactly what we're doing with this bill. We're following the recommendations that were given to us by Albertans during that committee and are moving forward, unlike the opposition who are constantly wanting to go backwards. We spent months talking about the Election Act and consulting with Albertans, and beyond that the minister has also spent a ton of time consulting on this bill.

We will not be accepting this amendment because we are determined to take dark money out of politics. While the opposition can filibuster all they want, this side of the House is determined to make life better for all Albertans, and that includes making our democracy more accessible and more just. That's why we're moving forward with this bill, that's why we tabled it, that's why we're debating it, and that's why we will not be voting for this amendment.

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: Under Standing Order 29(2)(a), the hon. Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills.

Mr. Cooper: Well, thank you, Madam Speaker. It's a pleasure to rise, with some level of disappointment, I might add, and shock and surprise that the Member for Calgary-Hawkwood wouldn't want to support an amendment that would actually strengthen democracy, that would allow the Chief Electoral Officer to report on some of his concerns with this piece of legislation.

Let me just say, Madam Speaker, that we will be happy to speak about third-party advertisers, but there is so much work to be done in this legislation that we haven't even got there yet this morning. While we have been on the record on numerous occasions about the importance of ensuring fairness in our process . . .

Mrs. Littlewood: Except for dark money.

Mr. Cooper: There's nothing that makes me smile more than the government talking about dark money, because if there is darker money in politics than union dollars supporting the NDP, I don't know what it is.

Let's talk about third-party advertisers, then. Let's talk about third-party advertisers that all have a requirement to disclose. [interjections]

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. members, Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills has the floor, please.

Mr. Cooper: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I actually had an important question to ask the Member for Calgary-Hawkwood. In particular, I'd be curious to know some of his thoughts on some of the other questions that we've raised and why it wouldn't be important to send this piece of legislation to committee so that we could hear from Albertans on whether or not they think removing a residency requirement is a good idea. I'd be curious to know from this member what his thoughts are on why it's a good idea to not send this to committee so that we can discuss some of the big loopholes, big enough to drive a government advertisement through, when it comes to government advertising. And I'd be

curious to know why we wouldn't want to send this to committee so that individuals could come and speak to the committee about whether or not it's a good idea to provide the private information of 16- and 17-year-olds without their consent to an independent leg. officer.

I think these are reasonable questions to ask, and I think committee is the best place, and I'm curious to know why he doesn't agree with that.

The Deputy Speaker: Calgary-Hawkwood.

Connolly: Well, thank you very much, Madam Speaker, and thank you to the member opposite for the question. I just want to reiterate that we are opposing this amendment. We are strengthening and protecting democracy. We are making elections more accessible.

There are a lot of concerns raised by the opposition on money and financing, but let us be clear. This bill will end Jason Kenney's money from PACs. We are making sure that this Assembly and all of its members and all the members of other political parties are accountable to Albertans, and we are making sure that that side of the House isn't using their dark money. We still don't know who Jason Kenney's donors are, Madam Speaker. I don't know if you realize this. He promised us those donors, and we still don't have a single one. Not a single one. He promised Albertans those donors. He's breaking his promises to Albertans already, and he's not even in this Assembly. What can Albertans expect from Jason Kenney?

Mr. Cooper: Point of order.

The Deputy Speaker: We have a point of order. The hon. Member for Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills.

Point of Order Reflections on Nonmembers

Mr. Cooper: Well, thank you. It's a pleasure to rise on a point of order today. My reference today will be on 23(h), (i), and (j), language likely to create a disorder. I'm just wanting to reference some comments that were made by the Government House Leader yesterday with respect to the way that we speak about individuals who aren't inside the Chamber.

10:00

I know that the Member for Calgary-Hawkwood's favourite pastime is choosing ways in which he can speak disparagingly against the leader of the United Conservative Party, against an Albertan who very soon will be in this Chamber, and then he can speak to that.

But I think that there has been a tradition, and unfortunately I don't have it here in the *Hansard* from yesterday, but the Government House Leader spoke at length about how we ought to be careful with the language that we use with those who are unable to defend themselves, and I would encourage the Member for Calgary-Hawkwood to heed the advice of his House leader when it comes to speaking about those who are not inside this Chamber and the disparaging remarks that he might continue to make.

The Deputy Speaker: The Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Feehan: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I appreciate the opportunity to speak to this. I want to point out that the concerns that were brought up here or brought up about speaking disparagingly about someone outside of the House – I don't believe, although we can check the Blues tomorrow, that any comment about the personality of the person indicated in the comments was made but rather a quite defensible position that no names have been

provided after having promised those names. As such, it's simply a statement of fact, one that would be agreed upon outside of the House. As such, there is no point of order here.

The Deputy Speaker: Any other members wishing to speak to the point of order?

Seeing none, I'm prepared to rule on the matter. As members are well aware, there is a long-standing tradition that we don't speak disparagingly regarding persons who are outside of the House and cannot defend themselves. In this particular instance, however, I'm inclined to agree with the argument that the comments were not directed personally, and we have had a discussion yesterday about comments directed personally against a member's integrity, that sort of thing. I don't believe that occurred in this case, so I won't find a point of order on that. However, that said, I think it's more important that we stay with the relevance of the topic at hand and the discussion. So I would encourage members to please keep that in mind.

Let's continue.

Debate Continued

Connolly: Well, thank you very much for that ruling, Madam Speaker. I am sorry, and I am discouraged that there is a leader of one of the political parties in this room, namely the UCP, who has not disclosed his donors, and that's why we're bringing this bill forward, because we are tired of dark money in our politics. We are tired of dark money in this House. It is completely, completely the opposition who are constantly berating me, berating this side of the House, and who are being backed by people not even in this province. So I am very disappointed by the opposition, and I am . . .

The Deputy Speaker: Any other members wishing to speak to the referral amendment? The hon. Member for Calgary-Greenway.

Mr. Gill: Thank you, Madam Speaker. It's not 29(2)(a), right?

Mr. Cooper: No. You're on.

Mr. Gill: Okay. Thank you. Sorry; I couldn't hear in the commotion. Madam Speaker, I rise today to speak to and support my colleague's motion to refer this bill, An Act to Strengthen and Protect Democracy in Alberta, to committee. I mean, I do have my speaking notes, but I really don't think that we need it. This is the track record of this government, not consulting Albertans for the past two and a half years, and this government is at it again. A few days from today this House is scheduled to rise, and this NDP government – I don't know – sent their staffer to Staples to print this, like, photocopy this bill and bring and introduce it and then send it to Queen's Printer and then brought it again and introduced it as an omnibus legislation that demands thorough review and a broad consultation from all the stakeholders in this province.

I guess, going back to the track record of this government, consultation is not one of their fortes. We have seen Bill 6. We have seen Bill 30, Bill 31, and – oh, I forgot – the carbon tax, which wasn't even on the campaign of this government. I mean, we can still hope that this government would listen and respect Albertans because that's why we're all here, to respect and represent them. This government does not miss an opportunity every single day to disrespect Albertans by not involving them in any consultation, especially when we're talking about, you know, strengthening democracy, and those Albertans who voted for us, who sent us here: they're not even involved in it, and this government is, like, bragging about it, how great of work they're doing, right?

Let me explain, Madam Speaker, the massive undertaking of Bill 32. Many of the concepts and proposals in this bill were previously discussed in committee. It ran out of time, and the government refused to extend its mandate, so we have a clear idea of the complexity of the discussion that needs to occur for this bill. As my colleague from Airdrie said, we cannot do this in the dying days of this session.

Madam Speaker, the fundamental reason for Bill 32 to go to the committee is that – what does committee allow us to do? Let's focus on that. It consults Albertans. It consults all stakeholders. We have seen the consultation that took place on daylight saving time. I know it looks like déjà vu because I gave the exact same speech here, it seems, on Bill 30 on Monday night at 11:30. We had stakeholders, NHL teams. We had the airport authorities. We had Air Canada, WestJet, Calgary Airport Authority, Edmonton airport authority, who brought their concerns that the changing of daylight saving time is going to impact their business. It's going to impact the economic activity these stakeholders bring to this province. And all of a sudden the government realized: okay; we should put a stop to that. Why can't we do that on this bill? What is this government trying to hide – that's the real question – from Albertans?

These accidentally elected officials sitting on the other side are not giving their respect to Albertans, right? To begin, we must ensure that we're reflecting the views of Albertans when we come to this House, to review, amend, and pass legislation that will benefit all Albertans, not ideology, not their own interest groups but that will benefit all Albertans, which is the reason that we're all here. Clearly, that is a challenging job for this government because they don't want to listen to Albertans. As I said, we can go at it again. They haven't listened to Albertans on the carbon tax. They haven't listened to Albertans on Bill 6, Bill 30. You know, we can talk about this till, like, midnight tonight, about all those things this government has disrespected to Albertans.

Veterinarians, one of the most reputed professions . . .

Mr. Cooper: Respected, not reputed.

Mr. Gill: Respected. Same thing.

Mr. Cooper: No. Very different.

Mr. Gill: I know.

But respected professions, and this government is disrespecting them and not even getting them involved in the consultation. But, again, that's a separate bill, and we'll stick to this bill.

I was just giving a reference, a track record of this government claiming that they have the backs of Alberta families and Albertans, but clearly they don't because they will not entertain them, they will not listen to them, they will not get them engaged in the consultation process. So this amendment sends this bill to committee. Get all the stakeholders involved and decide this bill. Maybe this bill is a great thing. Well, let Albertans give us their input. I don't know why the government is trying to hide this thing. But let's get back to this thing.

10:10

As a Legislature we need to look at each piece of legislation with an eye to determining if it has forged the right balance for Albertans. The purpose of why we're here is to strike a right balance with every legislation. That's why we send bills to committee. Some bills are simple, but Bill 32 is not. This bill needs study, and the place to do that, in my opinion, is in the committee. We need to thoroughly understand the proposals in every bill for none of us want to pass a flawed bill, so let's send this bill to the committee

and let the committee members look into that. I think the government side does not even trust their own committee chairs. That's why they don't want to send this bill to committee. I don't know what their reason is to not send this bill to committee.

I mean, this government wants to create an independent office of the Legislature. We don't know why, but we know that this independent office will cost millions of dollars, and as the member from Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills, an outstanding constituency, said, this government did not want to appoint a seniors' advocate. This government opposed other important appointments, but they want to create an independent office for this reason. Sending this bill, again, would allow the committee to explore the concept of what works and what doesn't work so we can do it correctly the first time.

Bill 32 proposes to allow Elections Alberta to launch a door-to-door enumeration before every election. We have heard from the office that this is not the most effective way to do things, but again this government does not understand the meaning of efficiency, obviously. They don't respect Albertans' money. That might be a great idea, but again the cost is too much, and it's massive. There are other ways to do it, but this government doesn't want the committee to explore and listen and hear from stakeholders. Sending Bill 32 would allow us to look at the justification and determine if that expense can be justified every election. Perhaps it can, but right now we don't know if it is, yet we'll have to vote on this in a few days without having proper knowledge and consultation from those stakeholders, again, going back to the same point.

Then there are seemingly minor amendments such as the length of time a voter needs to live in Alberta before being eligible to vote in an election. Is that a minor amendment? I don't know. Let's hear from people who are going to be impacted, Madam Speaker. Sending this bill to a committee will allow us to ask Albertans what they think of that change, the very Albertans who have built this province, the pioneers, the people who work hard every day. Like, somebody can come here and change the fabric. Some people may like it. Some people may not. I don't know. We don't know. So why can't we involve people in this discussion? Perhaps people would want longer residency requirements. We don't know.

Here's another good one. Bill 32 eliminates a portion of the Senatorial Selection Act, which the NDP government let fall by the wayside, by the way. Those elections were a big step for Alberta. They sent an important message to the federal government of the time, and Albertans may well want to keep those sections.

Madam Speaker, the NDP may not realize it, but Albertans do care about elections and voting processes. They care very much, and pushing this bill through this House in these last days of session, as the NDP clearly intend to do, is wrong. I mean, like we haven't even scratched the surface of this bill. Let's remind everybody that it's, like, what, over a hundred pages long, and these are not just technical amendments. These are going to change the nature of voting in elections in this province.

Some of the amendments in Bill 32 are good, and I applaud the government for the modernization aspect of this bill, easing up the rules for advance polling and allowing for the use of new technology. That's good work, and we must acknowledge that on the government side. But on the other side there are other things that need to be discussed, and, you know, the stakeholders' input is important. I'm sure, in typical fashion, the NDP will only market these positive aspects of the bill to Albertans, but they will never ever mention the contentious side, the technical side to Albertans. They will only, like, show those positive sides to people. They'll never show the full picture.

So, Madam Speaker, sending this bill to committee will allow the public to engage in this process. We rely on them, we are here to

serve them, and I think it's our responsibility to engage them. That's why – let's do the right thing. Send this bill to committee, and let's hear from Albertans.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: Any questions or comments under Standing Order 29(2)(a)? The hon. Member for St. Albert.

Ms Renaud: Thank you, Madam Speaker. Well, that was interesting. The Member for Calgary-Greenway made a couple of comments. What I find really quite interesting is that he's probably the third person to speak now and they seem to be avoiding a topic, that topic being political action committees. To quote a local journalist Mr. Graham Thomson: "PACs... are becoming [a somewhat] invasive species in Canada." That was December 4 of this year. CBC: just a little reminder that "Jason Kenney spent 7 times as much as other candidates in [the] race to lead Alberta PCs." He filed \$1.46 million on campaign expenses. It seems to me that he and his comms staff made a promise to Albertans before he was elected that he would disclose, but he didn't. Interesting.

The Member for Calgary-Greenway asked us: what are you trying to hide? What are you trying to hide? Why won't you speak up? Your leader, your dear leader, has chosen not to disclose who backs him. Again, this is not the Wild West. That's why the first piece of legislation this government brought in was to change financing in Alberta because Albertans were sick and tired of it.

So I turn it around to you. What are you trying to hide? Why are you avoiding talking about PACs?

Mr. Gill: Thank you. An important question. The political action committee: I think it's important for – we do care about those political action committees.

Ms Jansen: Answer the question.

Mr. Gill: I am answering the question.

You know what I'm not trying to hide? The Hon. Jason Kenney actually did raise probably, they're saying, ever since we have elected him as a leader, more money than the NDP government has. We're not trying to hide that. We're not trying to hide that 75 per cent of Albertans do not like the carbon tax. We're not trying to hide that. We're not trying to hide that it's, like, over 55 per cent after the unity that will support if the election were held today in this province. We're not trying to hide that.

What we're trying to ask the government is: why are they not involving Albertans in a committee? Maybe when the Albertans get involved in the committee...

Mrs. Littlewood: Answer the question.

Mr. Gill: I am answering the question. Can you please stop heckling and let me answer the question?

Maybe if we involve all the stakeholders in the committee work, we will tell people what they think about PACs, political action committees. We're not trying to hide anything. I think the government side is trying to hide. That's why they're not willing to send this bill to committee. That's why.

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: Any other questions or comments under Standing Order 29(2)(a)? Drayton Valley-Devon.

Mr. Smith: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I very much thank the hon. member for his comments with regard to this motion to refer to committee. We know that referrals to committee are an important

part of our democratic system, and they help us to strengthen the legislation that comes before this House. Referring to committee allows the stakeholders to get involved, and you begin to have more robust discussion on these kinds of issues. I want to know, to a degree, how the hon. member sees that these committees can enhance that kind of discussion and that kind of debate. What kind of stakeholder? What kind of stakeholders would we like to see come before this committee to be able to strengthen this piece of legislation?

10:20

I really appreciate the member's comments there when he brings up the fact that on this side of the Legislature, when we look at this bill, we do see that there are parts of this bill that will strengthen democracy. For those parts of the bill we would thank the government for bringing those forward because I think it's in all Albertans' interests to strengthen democracy. We would point out that in this bill there are things like the mobile polling stations or the voter assist terminals that we can support because it does bring democracy to the people and strengthens our democracy. But that doesn't mean that the entirety of this bill is worthy of support. That's why we would suggest that this would go to a committee for discussion.

The Deputy Speaker: Any other members wishing to speak to the referral motion? The hon. Member for Lac La Biche-St. Paul-Two Hills.

Mr. Hanson: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. It's a pleasure to rise and speak on the referral motion for Bill 32. Now, there's been a lot of talk on the other side about PACs, and they say that we're afraid to talk about them. Well, I'm going to talk about them right now.

They also talk about dark money. I'm going to talk about that, too.

But I'm also going to talk about another acronym. It's called AFL, the Alberta Federation of Labour. [interjections] See? Now they're excited. Now they're excited.

Madam Speaker, I've been a union member. I've paid my dues. I paid my dues for 10 years, and I had no problem with that because we had a very strong organization that fought for its membership and fought for our rights. I was very proud to be part of that group. What bothered me was that a portion of my union dues every month, without my consent, would go to the Alberta Federation of Labour to pay for advertising for the New Democratic Party, to pay union members to go out and door-knock for the New Democratic Party, and I had no choice. I had no choice. I couldn't say: I want my portion of my union dues that's going to the AFL to support the Conservative Party or the Liberal Party or the Green Party or whatever party.

There are a lot of union members. I know that. I actually know some members of the Alberta Teachers' Association that don't support this party, but a portion of their union dues, without their consent, goes to support the AFL: \$1.25 a month per union member that is affiliated with the Alberta Federation of Labour. That's a lot of money. You take every union member in Alberta that's a member of that organization, \$1.25 a month, that's a lot of dark money. That's very dark money. You know what the difference is, Madam Speaker? The difference is that the people that are donating to PAC organizations are doing it with their own money of their own free will. That's the difference.

Mr. Carson: In Ontario.

Mr. Hanson: Of their own free will.

Mr. Carson: In Ontario.

Mr. Hanson: Of their own free will, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, the point is that people are donating their own personal funds of their own free will. Now, if that comes to an end, that's fine. But let's really end it. Let's end that mandatory donation from your union dues that has to go to the Alberta Federation of Labour.

Maybe this is why they don't want to send this to committee. Maybe they'll find that a lot of people will come forward and say: "You know what? I didn't realize that was happening, and I would like to get that changed." Maybe that's going to end the dark money that's been funding this party for years. Nationally, it's one party.

You know, they've tried to separate themselves from the federal NDP Party because they know that that the Leap Manifesto is widely supported across this country by the NDP Party. But now they're trying to pretend that they support pipelines and the oil and gas industry, and, boy, they got this monkey on their back that's the Leap Manifesto. They want to hide away from that, yet their friends in British Columbia are substantially banning pipelines, and they're supporting the Leap Manifesto. The federal NDP supports the Leap Manifesto. Maybe this is the stuff that they don't want brought out in a committee. Maybe this is why they don't want to refer this to a committee.

Now, there are some good things. One of the things I saw is that it establishes that organizations such as shelters, community support centres, and work camps, Madam Speaker – work camps that are full of thousands, literally thousands of oil and gas workers that do not support this government, and I'm glad they're going to have a chance to vote in the next election. I can't wait. This enables Albertans that are far away from their normal residences – construction workers are very, very concerned at the way their wages have dropped, at their ability to work and make their mortgage payments because their wages have dropped. The work has dried up under this government.

We have seen a resurgence just lately.

Mr. Feehan: Under this government.

Mr. Hanson: Under this government.

But it seems to be very coincidental that we're starting to get reinvestment right after the United Conservative Party joined forces. [interjections] You can laugh, but it's quite a coincidence that people are seeing that there's going to be a change in government in 2019, and they know that that government will have the backs of the agriculture and forestry industry and the oil and gas industry.

Is that what they're afraid of? Are you afraid to bring this to committee so that people can actually come and present to you? You're afraid that people are going to come and maybe union members are going to come and say: "You know what? I don't want you to use my union donations to support this party that I don't support."

An Hon. Member: No answer.

Mr. Hanson: Yeah, pretty quiet. They don't like that.

One of the things that I don't like – and it doesn't surprise me from this government because they like to build the bureaucracy – is that it proposes the establishment of another independent office of the Legislature. Now, everybody knows that we're supposed to be, at this point in our finances, with a looming, ever-increasing budget deficit, ever-increasing debt that we're going to hand to our

children and grandchildren and probably great-grandchildren. I think they said that it would take 127 years to pay off this debt after they're done.

So it doesn't surprise me that they're trying to increase the bureaucracy. That's what they've done ever since they got into power, but what we should be doing is looking at fiscal responsibility. We already have an existing office in the Legislature to govern elections, Elections Alberta. They've been doing a fine job.

Mr. Carson: Forcing a by-election is really fiscally responsible.

Mr. Hanson: Well, there's a difference, you know. You can force a by-election or you can just walk across the floor, but I don't know which is better, right? [interjections]

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. members.

Please continue.

Mr. Hanson: Thank you, Madam Speaker. It's really nice to be supported by your chair that we can actually speak freely in the House. [interjections]

The Deputy Speaker: Please continue, hon. member.

Mr. Hanson: Thank you, Madam Speaker. My main point is, you know, that we did talk about PACs, and they have brought up dark money, and they say that we refuse to talk about it. Well, let's talk about it. I'd like somebody from that side to stand up and defend the fact that people's money is used against their will to support a party that they don't believe in. I know that there are a lot of union people out there, and I think that maybe if you did a poll at all the union meetings or sent it out to membership – maybe that's something you should do, send it out to memberships and say: "Which party do you support? Are you actually happy that a portion of your money every month goes to support an organization you don't believe in?"

Mr. Yao: Oh, they'd probably take the opportunity to out all those guys that didn't support them.

Mr. Hanson: Would they take that opportunity to out those guys? I bet they probably would. It probably wouldn't go over very well.

10:30

Again, like I say, I know that there are a lot of union and non-union workers that are up in camps that have had enough of this government. They've watched what happened. You know, the most disappointed people that I've talked to are people that actually supported the NDP government all their lives. They were ecstatic on May 5, 2015, when their government finally got a chance to get into power, and now after two and a half years they are so bitterly disappointed in the way they've acted, the way they've increased the debt of this province, the way they can't seem to manage a budget, the way they've got six downgrades.

You know, they talk about democracy. It's a big word they like to play with, "democracy." Yet giving Albertans the opportunity to come and talk to them at committee, giving organizations an opportunity to come and talk to them at committee: isn't that what democracy is, giving the voters an actual voice, letting them come and present their ideas on this topic? We continually, Madam Speaker, try to promote putting important legislation to committee. We have the bill on occupational health and safety. We've got industry experts that would love to come and talk to get it right.

I talked about my experience in the oil and gas industry, over 35 years in construction in total and many, many years of that as a

supervisor or as a consultant, where we dealt with safety on a daily basis. I know that there are people, there are actually companies in Alberta that specialize in occupational health and safety. They know that book inside and out, I guarantee a lot better than any of the members across the aisle. Why wouldn't you want those kinds of people coming and talking to you about this?

There are a lot of people that would probably love to come and talk to us about Bill 32. Why don't we give them that opportunity? We've got time. The election is not until 2019. There's nothing wrong with that. The frustrating part in some of the committees that I've been on is that we don't allow Albertans to approach us. They've asked, but every time we get an opportunity to bring them in, there's some legislative matter that we have to deal with, that we're not allowed to deal with anything else.

Last summer we sat for a four-month period, didn't have any meetings, waiting for a report from the Ethics Commissioner. Meanwhile there were three groups of Albertans that had been dying to come and talk to the Resource Stewardship Committee but not allowed. We suggested that we put a motion forward to change the standing orders so that we would have that opportunity while we were sitting in limbo waiting for a major report – sometimes these reports can take six months to a year – when that committee can't do anything else.

We actually put motions forward to this government to change the standing orders to give us that opportunity, that while we're waiting, instead of being a do-nothing committee, let's bring in these people. There's nothing wrong with having them. It's not going to interfere with the Ethics Commissioner's work or anybody else's work. It's not going to influence their work. So why wouldn't you allow Albertans to come to committee? What are we so afraid of, that they might have a good idea? There are a lot of very smart Albertans out there, a lot of corporations, a lot of organizations that have done a lot of work, and I'll tell you what: they're a lot more efficient with their money than this government is. A lot more.

I talked yesterday about the Blue Quills University out in St. Paul and the budget that they have. Madam Speaker, you know the fine work that they're doing out there on a shoestring budget. They can't afford a load of gravel to put in their parking lot because they spend it in the classrooms and supporting their students. These are the kinds of things. You know, there are specialists there, and I've mentioned to the Minister of Indigenous Relations on a number of occasions that there are some great people out there that potentially, if he had them as advisers or on staff, might help him with his job, might make it a lot easier.

There's nothing wrong with talking to Albertans. Why wouldn't we do that? We're going to continue on with pieces of legislation such as Bill 32, pieces of legislation like Bill 30. We will continue to put in referral motions to have this stuff sent to committee. There's no reason at all why we couldn't deal with this over a six-month period and allow Albertans and organizations and even union organizations to come forward and give us their thoughts.

I fail to understand why a party that continually talks about democracy refuses to listen or allow dialogue with the people we're supposed to be representing. Very, very frustrating. We have groups that have been waiting to meet with the Resource Stewardship Committee for two and a half years, and they get roadblocked. Literally, they've been waiting, they've applied, and they've called but can't get a meeting, yet we sit, like I said, for four months doing nothing.

Mr. Gill: Why?

Mr. Hanson: I don't know. Why wouldn't you want to talk to Albertans?

You know, one of the groups that wants to come and talk to us are the recycling organizations of Alberta. That's a really big thing. Why wouldn't you want them to come and speak to the Resource Stewardship Committee? I mean, I think our job is to protect resources in Alberta, to protect the environment in Alberta.

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: Under Standing Order 29(2)(a), the hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Loyola: Thank you, Madam Speaker. It's always such a pleasure to get up in this House and correct the misguided information that's coming across from the opposition. You know, the opposition likes to light its hair on fire so much, and I think that might be the problem with the member over there. I want to thank the Member for Lac La Biche-St. Paul-Two Hills. He's a good man. He's a good man. I love working with him on committee, on the many things that we do together.

Of course, you know, for all the lovely people following us at home, this House has specific rules. We are sent here on behalf of Albertans to create those rules, the laws of this land. It's a wonderful thing to do. It's a wonderful thing to be a part of, especially for me, someone who came from a country where there was a dictatorial regime that took away the human rights of individuals.

Mr. Strankman: That's a success story.

Loyola: Yeah, and it's an important story, and it's an important one for you to hear, sir.

Madam Speaker, through you to the members on the other side, protecting democracy is absolutely essential. I can tell you how passionate I am. I've stood in this House several times to talk about how passionate I am about this.

Now, one thing I want to comment on regarding the speech from the Member for Lac La Biche-St. Paul-Two Hills. One of the first things that we did, one of the absolutely first things that we did was that we put a stop to corporate and union donations and the influence of that money over our democracy. But you know what? Let me tell you this. Having been a union member for a long time and even having been a union vice-president and president and having worked my way up in the union, when I wanted to see a change in my union, I started participating in that union, because that's the way that democratic institutions work. If you want to see a change, then start participating, right?

Now, the Member for Lac La Biche-St. Paul-Two Hills says, "Okay; well, there are some union members that don't want their money going to particular campaigns, programs," whatever the case may be. Well, guess what? They have an opportunity to go to their union's annual general meeting, where the treasurer of the union has the responsibility to disclose everything that the union is going to do, and much like in this House, the people vote on exactly what the union is going to be spending their money on. It's a democratic process.

Now, I understand there are always going to be a minority of individuals that perhaps have different ways of seeing the world. You know, they have different ways of even communicating what their thoughts are, and we need to respect them. One of the fundamental rights that people can expect, not only in this province but in democratic institutions all over this province, is that they will be listened to, and that's what we are doing.

10:40

Now, one of the most important pieces of information that I need to correct the member on is because he's saying: oh, we don't want

to listen to Albertans. I'll remind the member that one of the first things that we did is that we struck the Select Special Ethics and Accountability Committee, and the responsibility of this committee was to listen to Albertans regarding the Election Act. Here we have in front of us this referral motion to send this bill back to committee so that we can listen to Albertans. But guess what, Madam Speaker? We've already been through the process of listening to Albertans. We listened to Albertans on the issues of not only the Election Act but the Election Finances and Contributions Disclosure Act as well, and we brought those changes forward to this House. That was more than two years ago. So to all those people who are following along at home . . .

The Deputy Speaker: Any other members wishing to speak to the referral motion? The hon. Member for St. Albert.

Ms Renaud: Thank you, Madam Speaker. Again, I mean, I'm not surprised that the motion is to again refer to committee. But just to expand on what my colleague just said, we spent a lot of months on a special select committee reviewing four pieces of legislation, actually. I'm trying to think about the time members of the opposition walked out of that committee because they didn't like something. Hard to remember, but it's okay. They got a little bit uptight, but that's understandable.

I wanted to go back and talk a little bit about some of the things. We already know that the speakers on the other side are choosing to not really talk about PACs – and I get that because it's a little bit embarrassing for them – where they once stood for their constituents to say: "You know what? Let's make this a level playing field. No more of the Wild West. We want to know. We don't want people able to buy elections anymore. We want fair and democratic elections." Now they don't say too much because their new boss plays a different game.

I want to go back and talk about some of the things that are essential in this bill and why it is so important that we get this done now. Obviously, one of the things that I think is truly important and why I don't think this should go back to a committee is that for far too long people that have been marginalized, people with disabilities, maybe people that live in communities that are not very accessible have been excluded for a number of reasons. That sometimes is just accessibility. What this bill does is that it just takes it a step further, and it includes in the language of the bill the importance and the need to make it not just accessible but barrier free. There is a big difference between accessibility and barrier free.

There's a reason that particularly people with disabilities in large numbers don't consider themselves or count themselves as electors. Because not only do they face barriers in regular, everyday life, but the barriers to this process are very real. They're architectural, they're physical, they're attitudinal, they're cultural, they're informal, they're in terms of communication, and they're legal. This bill does a lot to correct some of the problems. I know that people with disabilities and their thousands and thousands of supporters right across this province want to be heard. They're tired of having legislation created for them and not with them. This is a way for people with disabilities and their supporters to get involved, to be assured that the places where they go to vote are accessible and barrier free.

The other thing I really liked about this bill is that it talked about providing information, educational materials to our young people that are still in school. Now, I think we've all probably at some point as teenagers received information, if not in class, specific information about elections, how that works, how to get involved in the process. We've perhaps had debates at our schools and things like that. But this puts another emphasis on the

importance of informing our young people, and that is so important because they are our future. They really are our future. When we are no longer in this House, we are perhaps no longer working, and we are relying on our young people, they will be there to take care of us, and they will be informed. They'll believe in science. They'll believe in the need to address climate change and so many other things.

I'm really quite hopeful that they'll also recognize the dangers of allowing Canada, particularly Alberta, to engage in the kinds of activities that we see going on in the United States and that political action committees have truly become a problem. Just look, read the news any day of the week, and you will see that.

Mr. Cooper: Like a third-party advertiser like the ATA.

Ms Renaud: Third-party advertising: funny that the member should mention that.

You know, I did a really quick scan earlier today to look at the website just to see – I'm trying to think. It was the third-party advertiser. I think it was the period from January to September of 2017. I just picked three of the political action groups that are known supporters of Mr. Kenney or the UCP or one and the same or whatever, and the amount of money that they raise to take out ads, to do billboards, to do endless reams of memes on Twitter or Facebook . . . [interjection] Sorry. I'm just teasing. We know that those are PACs. We know it.

I did a quick scan just for one, let's say the first one I picked, the Alberta Fund. We have a numbered Alberta company donating \$15,000 in that particular quarter. I don't know. I think Albertans want to know: who is that? Who is that that is buying votes? Who is that that is supporting that party? Another one: Balanced Alberta Fund. There were a number of – I'm not saying that it's wrong for energy companies or developers or special-interest groups to donate, but, you know, in just two lines it was over \$50,000 in one quarter. I don't know. Wouldn't you like to know who makes up these groups, who are buying elections, who are supporting and financing and bankrolling politicians? The Alberta Advantage Fund. Any day of the week, if you frequent social media platforms, just go and have a look at the memes, go and have a look at the messages and what they are saying and who they are supporting, and you will get a very, very clear picture of who's doing what in this province.

I will say it again. I find it – you know, when we sat on that select special committee, we heard extreme disappointment from the then Wildrose Party about the inability in the time that we were allotted to address PACs. We agreed, and we continued to do the work. Yet now that they've become the UCP, with a brand new leader, we're not hearing much. When a member stands up to talk about PACs, all we hear are some incorrect comments about the Alberta Federation of Labour, which is a democratic organization, by the way. I've never personally belonged to a union or participated in one, but I've certainly learned a great deal from my colleagues. I have huge respect for them.

Those are some of the things that I think are very, very important.

I want to talk about enumeration. I think I heard somebody earlier today talking about, you know, "This needs to go back to committee" or "We don't see the use in this." I'm sorry, but we heard people last night talking very passionately about the differences between rural and urban ridings and why it's so important to pay particular attention, to understand the differences. I think that's what this bill also does. It provides the time and the effort to ensure that we get to communities that are often not counted, in the most respectful and inclusive way possible, whether

those are Métis settlements or in First Nations. So I think the bill very eloquently sets out how to communicate with those communities and how to get that work done.

10:50

I want to go on a little bit more about PACs, and the reason that I guess I'm focusing on that is because it was – very quickly we saw, at the very beginning, in 2015, when we brought in Bill 1 to address corporate and union donations, that the Wildrose Party was very proud to support that. I remember that. I think most people in the House remember that.

Suddenly they're not saying too much, which, to me, is really quite disturbing. They now have a leader that did promise Albertans, looked right at them and said: "I will disclose. Transparency. I will disclose." And then didn't. Now we're not hearing anything about it. We're not hearing the members stand up and talk about the need to make elections democratic and fair, and that's essential. It is essential. Your man spent \$1.47 million, seven times more than competitors, to buy that election. Or to get elected. I'm sorry. I'll correct myself. That should be concerning to you because that's what we saw for decades in this province – decades, decades – and the minute that the new legislation came in to make it a more level playing field, to make it more transparent, to make it more democratic, suddenly you're so quiet. Why is that? Why is that? It's like you're auditioning for a new boss. I don't know. Could be.

Madam Speaker, I am happy to say proudly that I will not support this. I will not support a referral to committee because we did the committee work, and we heard loud and clear – and you all should have heard loud and clear in 2015 – that Albertans were tired, tired of the old way of doing business. Here we are. We have Mr. Kenney from Ottawa. We know his track record. We know his voting record. We know his promises. How many broken promises do we have? He's not even elected to this Chamber, to this House. We're hearing crickets about the dangers of PACs and the need to level the playing field, to make it fair, to make it accessible, to make it barrier free, so what are you afraid of? Back to the Member for Calgary-Greenway, who asked us repeatedly: what are you afraid of? What are you afraid of?

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: Under 29(2)(a), the hon. Member for Calgary-Currie.

Mr. Malkinson: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. It was a pleasure to hear the comments from my seatmate here. You know, she mentioned, right at the end, the importance of having barrier-free elections. I also do a lot of work with persons with disabilities in my riding, and I know that those particular amendments are something that would be much appreciated.

Now, of course, we've sat here and heard a lot of debate this morning on this bill. You know, I find it very interesting that the opposition talks continuously – and you talked about it in your speech as well – about PACs, political action committees. I find it interesting that they were talking about problems that we've already fixed. Instead of talking about those political action committees, we had several members that went on very enthusiastic interpretations of the truth of, perhaps, how unions function when it comes to the approvals that they need from their members in order to, at least before we solved the problem, donate to organizations and parties that they felt would be helpful for their members.

Now, they bring that up over and over again, and, I think, why that is – and I would like the member's thoughts on this – is because it changes the conversation to something that we have already solved. One of the first bills we brought in, as was mentioned by

the hon. member, was to ban corporate and union donations, yet they talk about it in this House over and over and over again in order to change the conversation and not talk about the political action committees that the hon. member mentioned, that are actually associated with the members over there.

It's not just them. I mean, I don't mean to, you know, pick on one particular party. The party to the right of you in the House, the Alberta Party, has also mentioned that they have a political action committee as well. There was, in fact, a news article that said that that political action committee was going to help pay for that particular party's leadership race. Now with this bill we are trying to correct some of those problems.

I would be curious what the member thinks about the opposition and these political action committees, where the opposition keeps talking about something we've already solved. I was wondering if you had any thoughts about why that is and how our bill actually solves the problems that the opposition seems to have problems with.

The Deputy Speaker: St. Albert.

Ms Renaud: Thank you, Madam Speaker. Thank you. Well, you know, I'm not entirely sure, but I would guess that they don't want to talk about PACs, so what they say is: bad unions, bad NDP, bad unions. I think that's been the shtick that they've been flinging for the last couple of years, so I don't see them stopping any time soon. But I do want to say that if I were sitting on the other side and I looked at this legislation and I truly wanted to include as many people as possible in an election, in a fair and democratic election, I would support this.

Here are some other reasons that I did not mention. In one of the sections it talks about accessible voting equipment, and it goes into quite a bit of detail about allowing people who require some adaptations to be able to do that. It allows them to vote privately. It allows them to do so independently. For those of you that have loved ones or friends or family that have disabilities or you are a supporter of people with disabilities, you'll know how important that is and how essential that is and how easy it is to prevent somebody from participating with something as simple as a curb cut or one stair. To have this legislation lay out the accessibility and barrier-free nature of voting in Alberta is fantastic to me.

Again, I don't entirely know why the opposition does the things that they do, but again I want to quote a reporter, a local reporter, Mr. Graham Thomson. I keep going back to this because I think it is so important and insightful. He said on December 4, "PACs . . . are becoming [a somewhat] invasive species in Canada." They certainly are, and we see that all the time. We see the damage that it has done in other jurisdictions, and we see what's happening here. The moment that legislation was brought in to take care of the problem of levelling the playing field and banning corporate and union donations . . .

The Deputy Speaker: Any other speakers to the amendment? The hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Devon.

Mr. Smith: Thank you, Madam Speaker. Thank you for letting me rise to speak to the referral amendment on Bill 32, An Act to Strengthen and Protect Democracy in Alberta. I want to start by saying that in this House the opposition takes seriously its job to be able to take a look at legislation, to identify those parts that it can support, those parts that it has problems with, and then to make a decision on whether or not we believe this bill should move forward into the public realm.

There are parts of this bill that we do support, Madam Speaker. There are parts that we believe will strengthen voter engagement.

There are parts of this bill that we believe will strengthen and will protect our democracy. Modern election practices like mobile polling stations and voter assist terminals and electronic polling books, we believe, take us a step forward in being able to protect and strengthen our democracy. Automatic registration for 16- and 17-year-olds, to try and engage younger voters, is a positive step.

11:00

We believe that there are parts of this bill, Madam Speaker, that would be deserving of respect, but we do also note that there are portions of this bill that, we believe, rather than strengthening democracy, will actually weaken it. So parts of this bill, we believe, would benefit from a referral motion to committee.

A referral motion, Madam Speaker, as I'm sure you well know, is designed to try to help legislation, to try to make legislation stronger, to help the people of Alberta have a stronger legislative underpinning to the actions that they partake in every day. We believe that robust discussion in a democracy, alternative points of view, and the discussion of those points of view are very, very positive things. We believe that bringing in stakeholder input is a positive thing. So a referral to committee is a wise thing when you can identify areas in a bill that need work. We believe that there are some significant portions of this bill that rather than strengthening democracy actually have the opposite effect.

There are questions that this committee should ask and try to answer. For instance, does door-to-door enumeration actually make our democracy more effective and therefore make it stronger? Does eliminating the six-month residency requirement actually make our democracy stronger? Does striking out portions of the Senatorial Selection Act actually strengthen our system of democracy? Does putting spending limits on third-party advertisers strengthen or weaken our democracy? Will a six-month window strengthen democracy if the Chief Electoral Officer has to discontinue an election? These are questions that we would like to refer to committee, that we believe need to be discussed, need to have stakeholder input, need to have Albertans' input in order for us to determine if this bill is the best bill that it can be.

From our position as the opposition, Madam Speaker, we believe that this bill does need improvement. Are there parts that are worthy of support? Absolutely. But there are significant portions that we believe need further clarification and discussion by Albertans. The door-to-door enumeration, we've already heard from other hon. members, will cost somewhere around \$11 million, and Elections Alberta and the Chief Electoral Officer are not convinced that it's actually an effective way of strengthening our democracy. Elections Alberta and the Chief Electoral Officer recommend that target enumerations be put forward, that a full mail-out accompany it, and that this would actually save Albertans money, that it would actually only cost about \$5 million.

Mr. Gill: How much?

Mr. Smith: About \$5 million. A savings of \$6 million.

In the last election 60 per cent of the returning officers said that they had a hard time finding enumerators and that those enumerators believed that at times their safety was being compromised. That's why we send them out in pairs. If the government actually believes that this is going to strengthen our democracy yet the Chief Electoral Officer and Elections Alberta question that, then maybe it's time to bring in more people to be able to have a reasonable discussion and debate on this particular issue.

Madam Speaker, the hon. Member for Calgary-Currie just spoke in this Legislature and said that he wanted to bring in – and it's a

goal that we would support – barrier-free elections. We can support that. However, we also understand that there are at least a couple of hurdles and a couple of barriers that would be seen as reasonable in a free and democratic society. We've placed some of these barriers in there for very, very good reasons, because they actually help to strengthen democracy. That Canadian citizens should be the ones that participate is actually a barrier, but it strengthens our democracy. That you should be 18 years old, the age of majority, and have the capacity and the maturity to be able to function and to make choices in a reasonable fashion is a barrier, but it's seen as a reasonable barrier in our free and democratic society.

Traditionally we have said that having a six-month residency requirement is a reasonable barrier and that it actually strengthens our system of democracy. Why? Well, I know that when I was in my social studies classes and we talked about a residency requirement, we talked about things like making sure that when people vote, as much as possible it's an informed vote, Madam Speaker. Living in the area, living in the province, living in the community and understanding the issues of the day, having a history with the issues of the day, understanding the people that are bringing forward the issues, the organizations that are bringing forward the debate is important. When you live it, when you are a part of it, that brings an informed participation. We know that a democracy is only strong if the people that are involved in it are informed.

So it's concerning to this opposition, and perhaps it's a really good idea – I would argue that it's a very good idea – to take this to committee and let Albertans have some say on whether or not it should be a six-month residency requirement. This is a significant change. This is a very significant change, and it's one, Madam Speaker, that I believe should be referred to Albertans, to give them an opportunity to voice any concerns that they may have about this particular requirement being removed from the Election Act.

Madam Speaker, I want to spend a couple of minutes here talking about the checks and balances that are necessary in order to have a strong democracy and how I believe that referring this to committee would allow us to have the discussion on whether or not we are getting rid of one of the important checks and balances in our democracy, in this country, and in this province.

I want to agree with the Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie. I want to agree with that hon. member when he says, "If you want to see a change, then start participating." Participation and active engaged citizenry is critical to a functioning, healthy strong democracy. And when I look at this legislation and I see what some might call housekeeping, that some people would say that taking out and eliminating portions of the Senatorial Selection Act from the Alberta Election Act is just a piece of housekeeping, Madam Speaker, it is anything but a piece of housekeeping. If we want engaged participating citizens, I don't know how you do that and how you strengthen democracy by removing our right to vote.

We have a Senate at the federal level for some very significant and important reasons. When we created this country in 1867, it was determined by the provinces of this great country that it was imperative that we have a Senate. It was important to have that Senate because it would provide not only a body of second sober thought, but it would provide protection for the less populous provinces of this nation. Madam Speaker, if we're going to take the right to vote away from Albertans, I would suggest that there should be a conversation about that, and referring this to committee allows Albertans to have that conversation. This should not be eliminated through a back door: let's just not explain anything to anybody and let a sunset clause happen. This is an important democratic right that is being taken away from me and every other one of the 4 and a half million Albertans that are in this province.

11:10

Madam Speaker, the reason that a Senate is so important in this federal institution, this federal government that we have, is that there is a thing in democracy called a tyranny of the majority, where the majority in a democracy – we understand that rules and that acts and that legislation should be determined by the will of the majority, but that majority, when it acts, must respect the rights of the minority. When we started this nation, this great nation of ours, we said that it would not be okay for provinces like Ontario and Quebec, that had a significant population base, to be able to pass whatever legislation they wanted without the support of the less populous provinces. So we included a Senate where the less populous provinces would have a considerable say even to the point of being able to deny legislation coming from the House of Commons if they believed that it was important to defend the rights of other parts of this country.

For this government, as a piece of housekeeping, to eliminate the senatorial elections rather than having the discussion, reviewing that piece of legislation, rather than allowing us to go to committee to have those conversations, in the height of my mind is one of the most antidemocratic things that I have heard of any government at any time in the history of this country. It is a very serious, serious thing that we are doing when we do this, Madam Speaker.

I had the privilege of running and working with the first elected Senator in this province, a man by the name of Mr. Stan Waters. I helped work on his campaign. I campaigned with him. I voted for him because he was an amazing individual who was worthy of becoming our first elected Senator in the history of this nation. We should never stand quietly by when our rights to be able to vote are being taken away from us. That, at least, should be able to refer this to committee and to allow Albertans the opportunity to speak on this.

Madam Speaker, it is a sad day when this Legislature will not support a referral amendment that will allow us to defend the democratic rights of our citizens. I believe that it's important to let Albertans have a voice, and I believe that referring this to committee will allow us to allow those Albertans to have that voice.

You know, in this piece of legislation there's a six-month window that is set aside should the Chief Electoral Officer have to in an emergency discontinue an election. Now, there are some reasonable reasons for why a Chief Electoral Officer may need to discontinue an election. That is not our concern, Madam Speaker. Our concern revolves around the six-month window. That's a significant portion of time that members of a constituency . . .

The Deputy Speaker: Under Standing Order 29(2)(a), the hon. Member for Lac La Biche-St. Paul-Two Hills.

Mr. Hanson: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker, for this opportunity. I'd like to ask the member a couple of questions, without making disparaging remarks about anybody's hairstyle or choice of hairstyle.

Mr. Coolahan: Friendly.

Mr. Hanson: Anyway, friendly. Friendly.

The members opposite talk about full disclosure and dark money. I'm just wondering if he could possibly comment on whether he thought that, in the idea of fair play, if we're going to talk about full disclosure, that possibly the Alberta Federation of Labour should disclose how much money it spent in the last two elections, federal elections or provincial elections, how much money it spent on advertising, how much money it spent on paying members to door-knock or campaign for the NDP. At the same time, do you think it's reasonable to ask all unions in the province or across Canada to

inform their members, make it mandatory to inform their members, that a portion of their union dues are going to a PAC that supports a government or a party that they may not necessarily support? Just wondering if you would comment on how democratic you feel that is.

Mr. Smith: I thank the hon. member for his questions. You know, when I became a teacher, Madam Speaker, I was in the public school system and very proud to be in the public school system. I spent three years of my life in the public school system. I absolutely support the public school system, and I absolutely support all of the choices that we have in education.

But one of the realities when I became a member and a teacher within the public school system was that I had to become a member of my professional association, and I was proud to be a member of that professional association. It's called the Alberta Teachers' Association, and it does some excellent work, Madam Speaker. But I also understood that there were times when I was a little frustrated with my professional association because there were times when I believed that monies were being spent on issues that I know I didn't support and on things that I was not willing to see my money personally being spent on. Yet because I did not have a choice – I had to be a part of the professional association – I also then did not really have a choice into how that money was going to be spent.

I think that's the distinction that I would make in my own personal life. I understand and I support the concept that professional associations like the ATA will be run on a democratic basis, where I had the opportunity to go to the ARA, I had the opportunity to speak, and I had the opportunity to vote. But I did not have the choice as to whether I was going to join or not. I could not, in any capacity, if they began to spend money on issues and things that I truly, really did not support and really found personally, on my conscience, objectionable, I could not even refuse to be a part of that association, the ultimate choice that we should have.

There is that reality that there are times when life puts us into that grey area. I guess that from our perspective over on this side of the House the problem that we have with this piece of legislation and how it deals with PACs isn't so much that we are afraid of talking about PACs or that we don't even want to see some restrictions on PACs. What we are concerned about is that there doesn't seem to be a balance for how this piece of legislation will also address the problems of big money being spent by unions, when they pay for people to knock door to door, when they advertise for a particular political party. Those are equally egregious. We would expect that this government would be willing to send something to committee that would be able to address this and perhaps bring forward some amendments and some ideas for the government to be able to amend this legislation, to also deal with their dark money. That's the reality of where we're at, Madam Speaker.

You know, referring to committee is just . . .

The Deputy Speaker: Any other members wishing to speak to the referral motion? The hon. Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake.

Mr. Cyr: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I have the pleasure to speak on this referral. I've been a big part of the Select Special Ethics and Accountability Committee that had been put forward. The opposition and the government celebrated the creation of this committee – celebrated this committee – saying that this was huge.

You know, I think that it's disingenuous for this government to start saying that sending legislation to committees is a direction that is offensive and they feel that they've got it right and nobody can really improve on the legislation that they're putting forward, and

the fact, too, that they have more or less stated: we got it right. Well, this is the third time now that we are getting it right.

11:20

I would say that if the NDP were committed to actually showing that they wanted to see that this legislation is right, then what's going to end up happening is that we're going to see them wanting to move this back to a committee.

Now, I want to do a quick quote that was done here. Bear with me here. I apologize.

What we've got is a committee that, in my opinion, was functioning very well, the Select Special Ethics and Accountability Committee. The problem with that committee – and this was identified to the government – is that we ended up moving four pieces of legislation into the committee to review. Now we can't even seem to get one piece of legislation to the committee from this government, but they decided that the Select Special Ethics and Accountability Committee was going to review four pieces of legislation within one year.

Now, I have to say that I took on that daunting task because I believe that all four pieces were that important to Alberta. I more or less used my summer along with the members from the NDP and along with the other opposition members because we saw the need that these four pieces needed to go through and be done right.

However, when we had this researched, this was the first time four pieces of legislation had ever gone to a special committee. What happened was that we went to the government and said: we need a little bit more time to finish our job to make sure we get this right so that we can get the recommendations from the committee. We went to the committee, and the Select Special Ethics and Accountability Committee unanimously put forward a motion, and I will read from that motion that went before the House:

that the Assembly appoint a . . . special [ethics accountability] committee during the fall 2016 sitting for the purposes of reviewing the Election Finances and Contributions Disclosure Act, Election Act and the Conflicts of Interest Act, that these reviews be completed by March 31, 2017, and that this committee comprise membership similar to the Select Special Ethics and Accountability Committee and have complete access to and use of the submissions, research documents, and other information collected by the Select Special Ethics and Accountability Committee.

So what we did was we said: "Give us six months more. We can get this done. We're so close. We're so close. Just give us the opportunity, and we can get this done, even though this is unprecedented." We sacrificed our summer to get this done. We literally spent meeting after meeting to try to get this done. But you know what is offensive here? At the end the NDP's House leader said that the committee was being filibustered by the opposition and that in the end we couldn't get our work done because of that. That's the first time I heard of it. I didn't hear that being stated within the committee, that we were being disruptive in any way. I can tell you that when there were issues brought forward, obviously, we wanted to make sure our constituents were heard, but in the end the government stated that this was a failure and that we needed to stop, which is why we stopped seeing committees moving forward with legislation, I believe.

This referral motion is just saying: let the committee finish its good work that we had started because we had already talked about a lot of the stuff that we're addressing today. Specifically, we spent a lot of time on related parties, especially debate on their interactions. Now, in this committee we warned the government that PACs were going to become prevalent if they weren't addressed with the legislation. We warned the government that this was a reality. And you know what we hear today? The government

is saying: we don't want to discuss this because we are suddenly huge PAC fans.

Now I'd like to quote a debate from our current House leader, who brought some good points forward during a December 8, 2016, debate on Bill 35. Now, what he's saying here is that he's bringing forward an amendment regarding related parties, specifically trying to address PACs. So the government saying that we suddenly aren't wanting to talk about this: that's absurd.

Madam Chair, we recently discovered that the NDP has at some point in the past created what I would refer to as a shadow party. It appears, in our mind, when we look at this shadow party that it's being built to get around the rules that are regulating political parties or certainly is set up in a way that could get around the rules of political parties or at least skirt the spirit of the laws that this current government is bringing forward.

They, they being the NDP, have created an unregulated and unaudited, secret version of their party which can do things that the NDP as a party is not allowed to do. Now, I call it a secret shadow party because I believe most of the members sitting on the government side don't know about it, or at least what it truly is. I [believe] Albertans have never been told about it, and I certainly suspect that the bulk of members of the NDP Party are not aware of the secret shadow party that they are automatic members of.

Now, what's important here is that we warned the NDP during the Select Special Ethics and Accountability Committee, which we're looking to refer this legislation to to make sure that we get it right, that this is exactly what was going to happen. Then what we saw was that as soon as the NDP had an opportunity, they created their own secret shadow party.

They talk about dark money. But what we've got here is that the opposition has warned repeatedly this government that this was going to happen, and – surprise, surprise – it is happening. This is definitely something that we want to talk about. The only ones that don't want to talk about this is the NDP government.

I'm just going to go on because there are some important parts here.

Now, this leads to some weird issues that I think we need to discuss in Committee of the Whole. Two days ago the MLA from Edmonton-Whitemud rightly recused himself . . .

[interjections]

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. members, the hon. Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake has the floor. The volume is starting to get quite loud from this side. If you have conversations, please take them outside.

Thank you. Go ahead.

Mr. Cyr: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I was raising my voice to get over, and I apologize.

. . . from the debate on Bill 35 [because] he . . . signed loan guarantees for the NDP. Now, that member participated in the committee associated with those loans, but specifically for us here on Bill 35, he did recuse himself from the process, rightfully so. I commend him for recognizing the potential conflict and working with the Ethics and Accountability Committee and declaring that a conflict and taking the appropriate steps. I think we all should recognize that, and we recognize [that] the Speaker properly at that point asked him to leave the Chamber while we were debating this bill, so he [would not be] in conflict. Again, I commend the member for doing the appropriate process.

So we actually have government members who recognize that the direction we were going actually gave them conflicts of interest and took themselves out of the Chamber. This was the start of our government moving towards this, again, shadow party, and it's shameful.

To go on:

But the fact is that every single member of the NDP, whether they know it or not, is a member of the shadow party. This shadow party exists to guarantee the debts of the NDP that are in its official registered bylaws. Now, this organization is doing exactly what the Member for Edmonton-Whitemud is doing, and he honourably recused himself from this debate, rightly so. But every single member of the NDP is automatically a member of this secret organization that I'm referring to.

Now, this is within *Hansard*.

11:30

I'm going to go on to a response that the current Minister of Labour provided to our current House leader. The minister said:

Thank you very much, Madam Chair. There is no shadow party. The way that the member opposite is describing something that Elections Alberta and the Chief Electoral Officer are completely aware of and have been working with the . . . NDP [government] on is dramatic but incorrect.

So we have a matter of debate here. We're saying that this is incorrect, but the minister is saying that, more or less, she disagrees that this is happening, that this shadow party isn't happening.

To go on, I would like to go further down in her comments. We will be working with the Chief Electoral Officer to make sure that our party complies fully with the acts that we have brought forward to get big money out of politics and to make sure that there is transparency and accountability in all [the] things that we do.

I certainly would like to thank the member for his concern, but I do . . . stress that there is no issue here. Unless he can explain how this exclusion from the definition of third party does what he is talking about, I [do] not [support] this amendment because, again, I think it shows that the member does not fully understand or have the details on this issue.

What we've got is that we warned the government. We warned them that, in the end, we would have parties using shadow parties to do their advertising because it is a loophole that the government left in their legislation that we repeatedly told them about. They chose to ignore this. Now we're seeing some of those results. These individuals that they are saying are working within dark money are within the rules the NDP themselves have set, and I believe they purposely set this because, in the end, it gave their NDP union brothers and sisters the ability to funnel money inappropriately.

Now we're seeing that this is working both ways. They're getting upset with the corporations who work diligently within Alberta making sure their voices are heard through the regulations that the NDP set for third-party advertising, and they're calling them, more or less, criminals. That's what this dark money is insinuating. Either their union friends and these corporations who are working within the guidelines that the NDP set are criminals, or they're actually just utilizing what loopholes this government left that the opposition has completely and thoroughly tried to explain to them as being a problem but that they ignored.

Well, this is just another example of why we need a committee. This is another example why we need to refer this to another committee, to ensure that we get this right.

The Deputy Speaker: Any questions or comments under Standing Order 29(2)(a)?

Seeing none, are there any other speakers to the amendment? The hon. Member for Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo.

Mr. Yao: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I rise today to speak to the referral motion for Bill 32, An Act to Strengthen and Protect Democracy in Alberta. This is a bill that brings forward some very important changes related to our electoral system. It's hard to argue

against changes to advance voting like adding an extra day for people to make it out to their polling station or like enabling people to vote wherever they are. Let us face it. Voter turnout is not typically all that great. When you read comment sections of news media or on social media or you look at platforms such as Reddit, you can see that people are quite happy to engage in conversation and debate around politics, but somehow that doesn't necessarily translate into election polling numbers.

If you look at the Elections Alberta site and seek out information on the past few general elections, you will see what I'm talking about. A full 53 per cent of people voted in May 2015, just over half. The election of 2012 also saw the same percentage of voters cast a ballot, and in 2008 only 38 per cent of Albertans turned up to vote. I think it's a good idea to try to find more ways of making voting easy and accessible for Albertans in the hopes that more of them will have their voices heard when it comes to choosing the new government.

I can reflect on my own constituency, Madam Speaker. The regional municipality of Wood Buffalo has traditionally the lowest turnouts for municipal, provincial, and federal elections nationally. That's because we work for a living, and we don't have time to necessarily consider those things even though you hope that our citizens do recognize the need to vote. Of course, with our next election just over a year away, this is an important time to be speaking about these election items and issues. I'm sure there are a large number of Albertans who are counting down the days until there is a new election and they can choose a new direction for our province.

Today, though, we're debating whether or not this bill should be sent to committee. Now, so far I've only touched on one aspect of the bill, and there's a lot more information contained in those pages that I've yet to talk about. But when I first stood up to speak, I said that I was speaking to the referral. Let me be perfectly clear that I don't think we need to send this legislation to committee to talk about advance voting opportunities. Like I said, I think there are some good pieces about portions of this bill. [interjections] Man, I'm getting it from all sides here.

I do think that there are a few things in the section that could somewhat complicate the matter, and I won't dwell on those for now. The reason I think this bill should be sent to committee is because of some of the other matters this legislation introduces. I think we need to have a longer conversation about the residency requirements. I think it is important that we hear from stakeholders and the Alberta public about what they think about what is being proposed here. And, quite honestly, there's nothing being sent to committee. At the federal level every bill gets sent to committee, where it allows an open debate with the contributions of the opposition. As well, it's mandated that they do consulting and that they do a proper consult and that they do hear from all the interested parties.

Again, your bill on daylight savings time was the model for consultation, and it's a shame that you don't consider that for the rest of your bills. I'm just not convinced that that's the way to go for some of these proposals here.

You move into a province on a Wednesday, and on Thursday you head into the polls? At that time you likely don't have proof of address, which makes it extremely difficult for elections staff to ascertain whether or not someone is able to vote. That's one reason why I think that this should be referred to committee. I'd like to see us have the opportunity to have some further discussion on this. Let's be sure that we know how this will work before we move forward with this legislation so that we can have a seamless process after the fact.

Committee is so important to our legislative process. Nowhere else do we have the ability to call forward experts, subject matter experts, people who are directly influenced by the legislation that we propose. It's a privilege to be able to call on these experts and hear their information and insight and be able to ask them questions, and it's a privilege that, unfortunately, we don't take advantage of enough here in this Assembly. When there are still countries where democracy is fragile at best, it seems a shame that we don't use all the avenues available to us to practise democracy to its fullest.

I should clarify that I think this government thinks that sending a bill to committee is somehow a slight against the minister or the legislation, and that is not true. You heard me talk about some of the advantages of this bill a bit earlier, Madam Speaker, so I think it's clear that taking this step would be to ensure that we're giving the bill proper due process and consideration.

11:40

Another thing that I think needs to be discussed more fully is the introduction of another new independent office of the Legislature. These are not steps to be taken lightly and, in fact, would be accompanied by what could be a substantial cost. Perhaps not everyone is aware right now, but our budget is not exactly what you would call balanced, and the government is still investing in more red ink.

I think it bears repeating that previously this government denied the legacy caucuses of the United Conservative Party when they put forward suggestions about creating independent offices for seniors or for the disabled. Actually, that is true. I was one of those people that did propose that the seniors' office be independent and appointed, for that matter, because we went over a year without one.

Why were these requests denied, Madam Speaker? I'm glad you asked. They were denied due to the costs involved with setting up such offices. It's a double standard being employed here. I think that it's also worth noting that the independent office being proposed here already has an office out of which they could work whereas the offices previously put forward by our legacy caucuses were unique offices. But the thing is: why does a proposed office of an elections commissioner need to be an office unto itself? It seems perfectly reasonable for me to operate the roles they're suggesting within the current Elections Alberta office. I see no conflict of interest between the Chief Electoral Officer and the elections commissioner. If there is such, I would be happy to hear about it from the minister responsible for democratic renewal.

Again, this is where the committee is so useful. We can hear from Elections Alberta, and we can hear from other electoral process experts. We could see what Albertans and stakeholders think. Albertans are counting on us to get things right, and I think that part of the process here involves sending this to committee to be able to flesh things out, to listen to those subject matter experts, to have that discussion, to engage the public.

There's nothing to be lost by sending Bill 32 to committee but possibly everything to be gained. For the benefit of all Albertans and to demonstrate a true transparent and accountable system, I ask that we do send this to committee, and I hope all members of this House will agree with this.

I thank you for your time.

The Deputy Speaker: Under Standing Order 29(2)(a), the hon. Member for Drumheller-Stettler.

Mr. Strankman: Good morning, Madam Speaker. I am pleased to be recognized in the Chamber this morning. I'd like to compliment the member from the Fort McMurray region on his comments, and

I was wondering if he could expound on his comments there in regard to the idea of democratic renewal.

Mr. Yao: Madam Speaker, we should be quite proud of the democracy we have here. It is important that we need to encourage and emphasize for our citizens to be engaged more.

The flip side to this is that the number one country in the world where they are discouraging any oil investment – they're considered the lowest ideal place for investment in oil – is south of us, far south. It is a country where they currently and have for the last several years repeatedly jailed the opposition. Believe it or not, they'll put members of the opposition in jail. They will take the licences away from media groups like radio and television, from anyone who criticizes that government. There are persons who have been vocal against that government that have gone missing or have been discovered dead, and there is a lot of literature on this. Venezuela is a very tough country right now. The hope is that maybe they can get some democratic reforms in. Unfortunately, they are under the rule of a dictatorship, and it is very, very disconcerting to me that there would be members of this House that would support such a regime.

An Hon. Member: Really?

Mr. Yao: Absolutely. [interjections] You should check *Hansard* some time.

We need to recognize that we do have a beautiful country with amazing people and a system that has evolved and developed to the point where we do have the right to speak without fear of reprisal and that we have the right to influence who gets elected with our vote and that we have the ability to do other influences like freely go door to door without repercussions.

That said, in Fort McMurray I do have a hard time going door to door. It is a unique community because there are people that work long shifts, night shifts. You need to be careful about knocking on doors where they've been sleeping after working a night shift. But beyond little issues like that we're emboldened, we're empowered to communicate with our citizens. That is key, and that is important.

This bill, though, just requires some additional love, quite honestly, and that is why we do need to send this to committee. The committee is an opportunity for all groups to have their say in this. It has the ability for people to get more involved. This is a very large bill, and it was a very short time period that this government was asking for input. I've talked to some groups up in Fort McMurray, and they weren't even aware of – quite honestly, they're probably reflective of the general population – this bill. They weren't aware of many of these bills. But that said, no one reached out to them, and these are labour groups as well that have not been able to participate in this.

So to answer my good friend's question, democratic renewal: certainly, we need to demonstrate that we do have some transparency and accountability, that we need to move forward, and that we do need the input of all our citizens. I certainly hope that this government will consider that and support sending this bill to committee and support this referral motion on Bill 32.

Thank you very much, Madam Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: Any other questions or comments under 29(2)(a)? Calgary-West.

Mr. Ellis: Thank you. I'd like to thank the hon. member for his comments. He certainly said many things, and I believe I learned quite a bit. I was wondering, though: I don't recall him touching on the elimination portion of the Senatorial Selection Act, and I

wonder if he had any comments about what he thought maybe Albertans might have to say, of course, as it pertains to the importance of sending this for referral to committee.

The Deputy Speaker: The time has expired for that particular portion.

Any other members wishing to speak to the amendment? Drumheller-Stettler.

Mr. Strankman: Thank you, and good morning again, Madam Speaker. It's a pleasure to rise and talk about democracy in the Chamber. It's interesting that for some members, many of us, that's why we are in this place, to make our opinions known, and it's interesting that other members have different experiences in regard to democracy and the presentation of it.

This government's Bill 32, An Act to Strengthen and Protect Democracy in Alberta, is important, and it's important to all Albertans, particularly my colleague from Airdrie. Moving this to committee, I believe, is a well-reasoned referral, and it's important that we be allowed to have the democratic process, Madam Speaker. That's part of the reason why we have the galleries, both the members' gallery and the government's gallery behind me, so that participants can come and at least watch the work that we do in this place. It's important.

Madam Speaker, I've been in this Chamber for some time, and it's interesting to note that the first presentation of this approximately 150-page document was presented in somewhat of a loose-leaf fashion, and the final, I would say more legal, presentation of it is presented in a proper bound fashion. This one, I guess I would say, is from the Queen's Printer. It's unfortunate that the government, even though they talk about environmental awareness and environmental consciousness in slang, you know – not many would appreciate the loss of this much paper and the desecration of wood products to create all this legislation. With some foresight and foreplanning, we have modern electronic ways of presenting this multifaceted omnibus style of bill.

11:50

To be presenting it late in the session with a great deal of urgency is somewhat of a go-to motive possibly, Madam Speaker, that the government has in their playbook and are doing their very level best to leverage their actions with this 150-page document. Quite frankly, it could easily have been separated into two bills in the Legislature, one for election reform and one for election finance reform. I think that would be more definitive. But that could be sorted out in open committee discussion, and that's what our opposition members are trying to present to the Legislature here, that when it comes to open democracy, it's important. It's a significant part of democracy and democratic reform. Coming from a party that's named the New Democratic Party, I think it's somewhat ironic, but it's worth noting.

I would quote from my notes, Madam Speaker, that this legislation touches on many different areas, so I wonder exactly how much particular care and attention was given to ensuring that many if not all Albertans were consulted and that various stakeholders such as even Elections Alberta were fully engaged, including in the development of the bill. My colleague from Airdrie's motion for referral would ensure open and robust public discussion about that. We could bring all sorts of people to committee to present in many different fashions. And I have to think it's important to point out that there are portions of this bill that may actually enhance voter engagement, but unfortunately there are equally as many portions that, Madam Speaker, miss the mark.

It's great that the government has taken steps to prohibit government announcements during elections so as not to use taxpayer dollars to promote their obviously partisan interests. It's too bad that the exemptions for this portion of the bill are so numerous and extensive and leave too much wiggle room for the government to use their so-called discretion. The potential for abuse under the guise of keeping the public informed is still available. The list of exemptions needs to be shortened or restricted to ones dealing with public safety or any announcements that are required under law.

This government has already shown in the past that it can't resist making announcements while there is an active election going on, and with this long list of exceptions I have my doubts whether this will restrict them in any way. That's why hashing this out, Madam Speaker, in committee is so vital. It gives the opportunity to take that long list of exceptions and distill it down to those that will help make this more nonpartisan.

While on the topic, Madam Speaker, of fair elections I would really like to know where the idea for removing the six-month Alberta residency requirement came from, just as an example. We're here today to discuss this in an open public forum, a public place, so possibly the government members could talk about that. I'm fully in endorsement and receptive to new Albertans wanting to become politically engaged while in their new home. I've worked with many new Albertans coming from Europe in different fashions and who are so happy to be here in a freer and open and democratic environment. But I'm wondering if this isn't making too great of an allowance. Possibly another length like 30 or 60 days for the residency factor would be more reasonable. Some might say that the stipulations that we have in this proposed new legislation would allow some sort of a frivolous holiday excursion, and somebody would enter and think that they could vote.

That's why, Madam Speaker, an all-party committee is important, with proper engagement from interested stakeholders and public members, to give it absolute open and free time and proper due diligence. Surely the government wouldn't have an issue with that. Maybe the government will find out that it had it right this time and the committee will find that a complete removal of some portions is the thing to do. I would doubt that that would be the case, but why not allow a public and open discussion for that to take place?

You have noted how consultation always seems to miss the mark with this government. Either they did it incredibly poorly, as we found out and many members learned, I think, from political experience about the Bill 6 fiasco – Madam Speaker, I can remember that day standing up in this Chamber and asking why we as opposition and government members can't communicate, why the government members weren't communicating with the over 1,800 Albertans who were out on the steps of this Chamber. I think that there may be the possibility that there were leading questions

and that you can't help but arrive at a predetermined outcome, or they simply didn't engage with affected professional bodies like a certain group of nonhuman-practising medical professionals that weren't included in some more recent bill preparation.

Another point that needs to be brought to light is around the expense of a mandatory full door-to-door enumeration in every riding in the province prior to the next election. After all, Elections Alberta has priced out this option to cost approximately \$11 million. Given that the CEO has clearly stated that door-to-door enumeration is no longer an effective way to engage with the electorate, what we want to know is: why is this government not willing to take the advice of the CEO and allow for targeted enumeration combined with a full mail-out, which has been proven to yield more accurate results? That would cost, Madam Speaker, less than half, estimated at approximately \$5 million. Judging from our ballooning debt, this seems a much more reasonable alternative. As the debt rises, we need to tighten our economic belts, and sometimes the government misses that mark as well.

It was found out that in the last election 60 per cent of returning officers had difficulty recruiting enumerators. Enumerators also expressed safety concerns and are now required to travel in pairs, leading to skyrocketing costs for door-to-door enumeration given the doubling up of their staff. We also see that increasingly Albertans are not willing to answer their doors to strangers. That was one complaint that I heard from folks when we discussed legislation around the merits of getting rid of door-to-door energy sales in the last election. The government was very adamant in coming forward with that legislation. Madam Speaker, this is the kind of insight we would get into deeper if only we engaged with Albertans through the use of a legislative committee.

Madam Speaker, I see members opposite looking at the clock, wondering why we're continuing to be involved in this democratic process. It's the reason that we're here. I know you're listening intently, Madam Speaker. It's an important part of what we're doing.

If I could continue speaking about fiscal belt-tightening, I wonder why when we asked that the government advocate for the creation of an independent office of the Legislature for seniors or the disabled, it was denied based on the expense, but now we see that the government is interested in establishing an independent officer of the Legislature for the investigation and prosecution of . . .

The Deputy Speaker: I hesitate to interrupt, hon. member, but pursuant to Standing Order 4(2.1) the House stands adjourned until 1:30 this afternoon.

[The Assembly adjourned at 12 p.m.]

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