



Province of Alberta

The 29th Legislature  
Fourth Session

# Alberta Hansard

Tuesday evening, May 15, 2018

Day 30

The Honourable Robert E. Wanner, Speaker

**Legislative Assembly of Alberta  
The 29th Legislature**

Fourth Session

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## Legislative Assembly of Alberta

7:30 p.m.

Tuesday, May 15, 2018

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

**The Deputy Speaker:** Good evening. Please be seated.

### Government Bills and Orders Second Reading

#### Bill 7

#### Supporting Alberta's Local Food Sector Act

[Debate adjourned May 8]

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

**Mr. Stier:** Good evening and thank you, Madam Speaker. Good evening, everyone. Nice being here on a nice, warm summer evening to enjoy the weather and so on. I'm sure we all wish we were doing more of that.

Tonight I'm speaking for a few moments on Bill 7. I'd like to start out just with a little bit about myself in some respects, and that is that I take these bills that we get and the legislation that is written fairly seriously, and I like to take a lot of time to go through it. A lot of times I run into the legislation language and find the detail in the bills to be a little bit wanting in many respects, so I've put together a few comments with that in mind regarding Bill 7.

I know that a lot of you are very much involved with this local food idea. I think it is probably a reasonably good idea, but I just wish that the legislation was more detailed and not quite as vague. I understand that it's being proposed as a three-part bill designed to support Alberta's local food producers. The three main parts of the bill will deal with establishing organic standards, which must now meet Canadian standards established by the Canadian Food Inspection Agency.

I also understand, secondly, that the local food week is to coincide with Open Farm Days celebrations. It's usually held in the third week of August across the province. [interjections] Thank you. Establishment of a local food council can help promote and support local small producers, including farmers' markets, U-picks, at-the-gate stands, and other direct consumer activities are another aspect of this.

As most in the Chamber know, demand for locally produced food has steadily increased in Alberta in the recent past. This is great news as it means that more consumers are interested in knowing where their food comes from and how it's produced. The agricultural industry is an integral part of our economy. All over farmers' markets and direct farm purchases exceeded \$1 billion in 2016, and it is expected that this trend will continue for the foreseeable future. A large part of this growing subset of the agricultural economy is in organics. We see it every day in the markets that we all go to. While the term "organic" has been around for many years, it hasn't really been very well defined up until this point. I think Canada Organic defines organic agriculture as, "the way agricultural products are grown and processed; organic food is produced using environmentally and animal friendly farming methods."

Unfortunately, the term "organic" has been misused due largely to the fact that the organic market has been left unregulated for the most part, something Bill 7 attempts to address by bringing Alberta's organic food industry in line with the federal CFIA regulations, including regulations around labelling of foods as organic. I hope that Bill 7 would, you know, in the future be able to

be amended and be a live document and some of these things could be augmented, especially because regulations, of course, are not debated in this House. A lot of times that is one of our concerns that we've always had, where some of the vagueness is looked after in regulations, but how do we know what is really going to happen with regulation once it leaves this Chamber? Nonetheless, it is important that the organic label means something to Albertans, more than just marketing ploys. So it is important that we get this legislation right at this time.

One issue is that the cost of certification is completely borne by the producer if they want the organic designation from the CFIA. The question then becomes whether certification will actually be of benefit and increase profitability enough to make certification valuable to a small producer. While the organic industry is growing, we don't really have a clear picture yet of how much of the agricultural industry in Alberta is organic, actually.

It becomes difficult to know if this bill is really even necessary at this time, especially considering that the cost of the carbon tax already seems punitive. That isn't me saying this. A former Calgary greenhouse owner stated that the government couldn't have come up with a more punitive policy for small producers, specifically small businesses, generally, from the carbon tax.

The proposed legislation is great in theory, but it really comes down to: how much is this going to cost producers? I simply haven't been given the level of detail in the bill that I need to be able to answer that here today.

When it comes to the local food council portion of this legislation, it's, again, pretty unclear as to who will be on the council. All the legislation itself tells me is that "the Minister shall ensure that the members appointed to the Council are representative of Alberta's local food sector, including small producers and processors." Why doesn't the local food council follow the lead of the other producer associations and elect members of the council?

**Mr. Mason:** Like the Wheat Board.

**Mr. Stier:** Like the Wheat Board, hon. minister?

The format seems to be working very well for the pulse growers association. This would address the legitimate concerns that have been raised by many stakeholders that the council will become dominated by one sector of the organic food industry.

Another question that this legislation raises is regarding the costs associated with the marketing council, which remain completely unknown. If the government knows what they will cost, we haven't heard about that yet. It seems that the government has undertaken a review of agencies, boards, and commissions, and, for the most part, this has been one of the few things that I think has been a positive reform. But the question remains: why is the government creating yet another agency, board, or commission with this bill? Wouldn't it be a lot easier and more efficient to simply expand the mandate of an existing producer group, similar to what Bill 14 does with the Alberta Agricultural Products Marketing Council, for example? This government seems insistent on creating, with we're listening to here in this prepared statement, ever more bureaucracy and red tape, which is really unfortunate. We could have already used existing boards for this one, we believe.

Other concerns I've heard from several producers is with the vagueness of the legislation, which I mentioned earlier. But other producers are saying the same thing. Sadly, it's not something that is specific to this bill. It seems like every time I speak about a bill – I know I was speaking the other day about Bill 10 – I'm repeating the same story about how vague the legislation seems to be and how much the specifics are always left up to regulations. I know many of you weren't here during the NDP time in opposition, but I was.

If memory serves me correctly, there were many times that one of my colleagues from the NDP caucus would stand and decry how vague a government bill was and how much of the specifics were being left to regulations.

A great example of how vague this bill is, anyway, is with its definition of a product, which includes “any food or drink wholly or partly derived from an animal or plant.” I would say it’s fairly vague. That covers just about everything we eat. Is it that vague because government needed a definition that covered ordinary things? How about hot dogs? Do we need to have one for that?

**Mr. Sucha:** Only if they’re organic.

**Mr. Stier:** Only if they’re organic.

Seriously, though, why does it need to be so vague? That definition covers about everything Albertans could possibly imagine as food. We’re trying to work with legislation. It’s going to be something that’s going to be likely passed as law. Doesn’t it need to be detailed and right and correct and not vague? Wouldn’t you think that would be the way it should go?

7:40

Another of my concerns is related to why this bill, which is supposed to be related to organic labelling and certification, includes a subsection which deals with all agricultural products produced or processed in the province. All means all, so are we going to get involved in our poultry industry totally across the province? How about our pork industry? How about the beef industry? How about all of these industries? Are we really going to expand this that far?

Other concerns I have are whether the increase in power for the ag minister is really necessary in order to regulate organics such as in section 20, which the minister may make regulations on “respecting any matter the Minister considers advisable for carrying out the intent and purposes of this Act.” The good old catch-all clause that we see in a lot of the legislation.

Albertans already support local food, as shown by a 2016 survey where 92 per cent of households bought local at a farmers’ market. I’m not really necessarily therefore convinced that this legislation is necessary even if it was well thought out at this time. That’s why I would have preferred to see this bill go to committee, as was being spoken of earlier in this process, so that it could be very, very carefully, examined and as a result perhaps amended and improved. But since that was defeated, at this stage, because I am so concerned about the lack of information in this bill and the vagueness of the clauses without the specifics and that I’m not involved in any discussions on the regulations nor will any of my team be, I’ll be inclined, unfortunately, to vote against this bill at second reading. Change the way it reads. Improve it. Make amendments. Give us some detail to work with, something to bite on, and that could change.

That’s all I have, Madam Speaker, at this time. Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you all this evening.

**The Deputy Speaker:** Any other members wishing to speak to Bill 7?

Seeing none, are you ready for the question?

[Motion carried; Bill 7 read a second time]

### Bill 14

#### An Act to Empower Utility Consumers

[Adjourned debate May 9: Mr. Clark]

**The Deputy Speaker:** The hon. Member for Highwood.

**Mr. W. Anderson:** Thank you, Madam Speaker. It’s a pleasure this evening on this warm, wonderful May night to speak to Bill 14, An Act to Empower Utility Consumers. Bill 14 will allow the inclusion of water bills as part of the free mediation services provided by the Utilities Consumer Advocate. This bill will also expand to the Utilities Consumers Advocate the ability to report publicly the performance of power and natural gas utilities as well.

Since being established in 2003, the Utilities Consumer Advocate has had a mandate to educate, advocate, and mediate electricity and natural gas concerns as well for Alberta’s residential farms and small businesses. The UCA currently handles mediation between consumers and electricity and natural gas providers. Adding water to the mediation process, I believe, is a logical step. Madam Speaker, it’s very difficult, if not impossible, for the average member of the public to go up against the large utility providers with a dispute. Ordinary Albertans do not have the time or resources to do so. That is where the Utilities Consumer Advocate comes in. You see, the UCA specializes in handling disputes between utility providers and consumers. They exist to serve Albertans, and they handle thousands of complaints on an annual basis.

Now, with the economic downturn and this government’s prolonging the downturn with their policies, it’s not uncommon for Albertans to be struggling to pay their utility bills. This, coupled with this government’s increase to the cost of living for Albertans, has made the situation worse for a lot of families, especially those in my constituency. With the inclusion of water in mediation services and the expansion of reporting for utility providers, it is my hope that Bill 14 will be able to aid those that are struggling and are now faced with a problem with a utility provider. Now, there are many positives in this bill. Adding water bills to the free mediation service by the Utilities Consumer Advocate, I think, is a good step for serving Albertans.

Now, as I’ve noticed and as I’ve said before, I’ve spoken to many residents in my riding who’ve had some difficulties with their water supplier. Previously these residents had few options to handle these disputes. Now, with the passing of this legislation, however, mediation services can be provided for water bills. This slightly expands the role of the Utilities Consumer Advocate, and I think that, again, as I said before, this will serve Albertans better. In the past the UCA was limited in how it could address water bill disputes. However, with the passing of this bill, Albertans have someone in their corner advocating for their rights in water disputes.

Another encouraging part of Bill 14 is that the current UCA personnel will be able to handle the water mediation. What does this mean? This means that no additional labour costs will be carried by the UCA. Considering the financial crisis this government has put us through, I’m very much in support of not spending more taxpayer dollars to hire additional staff. Likewise, doing more with existing resources is something I think all members in this House would be and should be, obviously, in favour of. Now, in that regard, I commend this government, for once, for actually being fiscally responsible.

On the same note, I can support having the Utilities Consumer Advocate as a one-stop shop for Albertans with utility issues. This means that the process for disputing utility bills is quite simple. No need for busy ratepayers to be going to multiple different agencies to sort out a utility problem. Additionally, having one agency to deal with all utility issues allows for greater savings for the taxpayer.

I also have to commend the government for increasing the UCA’s ability to report on the performance of utility companies. I think that’s a great thing. Bill 14 will enable the Utilities Consumer Advocate to report on consumer service performance, the history of

consumer complaints, a company's compliance with laws and standards such as the orders from regulators, and a company's history of enforcement such as the investigation and, of course, penalties.

Knowledge is power, and if the consumers are able to make informed decisions on their utility providers, they can then choose the company that best fits their needs. This, in turn, can increase competition between providers and will better serve consumers. It gives them a choice. Competition is good. This also makes utility companies accountable to the public. Now they can no longer get away with unfair business tactics without being called out for it.

It looks like the government might be finally listening to Albertans. I've heard for three years concerns from constituents regarding their water bills. Too bad it only took three years to introduce this legislation. It is ironic how the government has been increasing the cost of utilities for three years, but only now do they introduce a bill that will assist Albertans with their utility issues.

Well, while I am supportive of this bill – I do believe there'll be positive results from it – there are much greater things the NDP government could be doing to better serve taxpayers. They could start with repealing the ideological carbon tax, which has had significant harm and impact on families. At \$30 a tonne, the carbon tax nearly doubles the cost of residential natural gas. This means that families have less money to spend on their housing, food, and things that are truly important to them. What would happen if this government is still in power when the federal government raises the carbon tax to \$50 a tonne? Wow. To \$50 a tonne. Will this government, the NDP, actually stand up for the interests of Albertans, or will they blindly follow the federal government and significantly increase the cost of living for Alberta families?

We can also see the NDP pushing their ideological agenda at the expense of everyday Albertans with their coal phase-out. Coal is the most efficient and most reliable form of electricity. The early phase-out of coal will only end up costing ratepayers more. How can the government say that they support families when their policies again and again end up hurting those families they claim to help? Does this government know the impact of their policies? Do they understand the impact of the carbon tax and the coal phase-out on Alberta families? I don't know.

While many families were barely making ends meet – barely making ends meet – prior to this government pushing their ideological agenda, can they imagine how much worse it is now? If the members opposite are concerned about ratepayers and Alberta families, there is much more that they could do. However, as we've all seen, they've not acted to repeal their detrimental policies despite repeated requests by the members of this side of the House, the opposition.

**7:50**

Let us also not overlook the irony that this government is advocating for more information to be publicly available, yet they are hiding and trying to downplay the effects of their policies. Now, I do think it's a good thing that utility companies are accountable to consumers. Too bad this government isn't held to the same standards.

Now, in closing, Madam Speaker, I do plan on supporting Bill 14 as I believe that this legislation will be beneficial to Albertans, and I do commend the government on finally doing something to help utility consumers, but I will continue to press the government to take further action to repeal their energy policies that have truly harmed all Albertans.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

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

Seeing none, any other members wishing to speak to the bill? The hon. Member for Chestermere-Rocky View.

**Mrs. Aheer:** Thank you, Madam Speaker, and thank you again for the opportunity to speak. I wish we were outside in the nice warm weather. It's a little chilly in here tonight. Again, I wanted to thank the government for bringing this bill forward.

A couple of interesting things here that I thought about when I was reading over some of this legislation and just some of the information that has been put out. Over the last little while the UCA has received 179 calls with respect to water bills, which doesn't seem like a lot, and it's wonderful that Bill 14 has given them the mandate to handle these. But in the city of Calgary – and this is expected to rise. What I thought was really, really interesting, Madam Speaker, was that the UCA between 2017 and 2018 took 22,790 calls and conducted 5,184 mediations. That's pretty incredible. I mean, I imagine that many of those calls were probably able to be dealt with just with the call alone, but that's a lot of mediations on electricity and natural gas.

I guess one of the questions that I have with respect to this is: is the mandate of the UCA also going to be expanded to deal with renewables as well as they come online? There are going to be all sorts of disputes and interesting things that happen as the REPs are built and as the renewables come online. It's just a question for later. If someone can answer that, that would be wonderful. We're going to be having a lot more interest, for lack of a better word, in mediation and necessary people to be there in order to be able to look at a person's bills and have that dispute resolution, especially with capped prices on electricity and wind. It will be significantly more difficult to find out if something has gone wrong with your bill.

I'm just curious if the mandate for renewables will also be expanded in this particular bill or if the bill will be open to that. In my understanding of this bill, that's not up for consideration. I would hope that there will be an advocate at some point that will be able to help out with those disputes, too.

Having said that, you can imagine, you know, that if the UCA doesn't have formal enforcement powers, then that is difficult, but one of the things – and I think I mentioned this before – is that they have the ability to publicly report on providers. That's a very, very significant tool, that they can push companies that are not putting the interests of the consumers first by publicly being able to explain to people what these companies have been doing.

For example, you have a large company that provides water. Right now, without this person, there are very few incentives, Madam Speaker, to prevent a company from overcharging customers or not addressing customer complaints, especially with respect to unexpectedly high bills, especially if the individual is not representing their customers appropriately and is not helping out with customer policy. The ability for the UCA to publicly report on customer service performance, history of consumer complaints – and that one in particular is, I think, very important. I think most Albertans will, knowing that they have access to this – and I think that part of the plan, too, that is super important, is that Albertans understand that they have access to this. I mean, I think most of us, obviously, don't think about this until we see a bill that makes your eyes bulge out of your head and you don't understand what's going on. All of a sudden you're trying to call somebody to try and help you.

But if there's a history of consumer complaints to a company that is not providing the ability to address a customer complaint and is not incentivized to do so, it's very difficult to follow up on that. The

ability to report history of consumer complaints and the history of investigations as well, Madam Speaker, will mean that companies that make a pattern of overcharging or becoming inattentive will be highlighted. It's a huge, huge, important piece for these companies to be transparent and make sure that they're doing right by the customers. I think that's excellent.

I think that if these things such as being inattentive and whatnot are highlighted, it will dramatically affect the ability to attract new customers, and at the end of the day the customer is always right. If the customer has the ability to be able to research and find out what's going on and to be able to advocate on their own behalf, especially with what the bill does, I think the companies themselves will be more willing to make sure that they're taking good care of their customers. That's always good.

Also, the good part about it is that you retain customers as well, right? Customer service and attentive abilities within these companies I'm sure for the most part are actually quite good, but this will reinforce and make sure that they take good care of their current customers as well as having to protect their public image, which I think at some time, to a large degree, is probably the best tool that we have. Certainly, with the advantage of social media and all of the other things that we have access to, information is quickly released. If a company is not doing right by their customer, I can almost guarantee that that's going to make it onto Twitter and Facebook pretty quickly, and those companies will have to deal with that quite fast. That's a good thing.

Companies that are attentive to their customers will generally work to resolve disputes anyways, but they will also benefit on the flip side from strong, strong customer service. As much as the bad representations will be made public, so too will the good ones. That's wonderful for companies that are doing the right thing, that are resolving disputes, and that have strong customer service records. Those good things will also be made public.

There was a news story on this legislation, about some of the consumers and their interactions with the UCA and that they're ultimately made to pay the higher bill, but at least with this legislation it will give them some time to delay a threat of their water being disconnected. Madam Speaker, again, can you imagine the anxiety from those kinds of things happening? Everybody is paying a lot more right now. You know, there's a lot of suffering going on in this province. We have a good chunk of our population that isn't working right now. We have a growing population of newcomers coming in but also of our seniors, too, and people who are on fixed incomes. The stress of having your water turned off or other things is massive. At least, through dispute resolution and through the UCA they have the opportunity to bring that forward. It gives them a little bit of time to figure out what's going on.

The legislation will also protect municipalities, who have jurisdiction over water utilities, from being put in a position to have to subsidize abnormally high water bills, which is what has happened in Calgary for some time now. I mean, we're looking at a subsidy of \$1.5 million, which probably doesn't seem like a lot in the grand scheme of things, but it is, especially if this is an annual subsidy that's happening.

I'd like to ask a question, too, if there's anybody who can answer this for me. The legislation protects municipalities, who have jurisdiction. How are they protecting the municipalities from this? What is in the legislation? I'm not quite sure I understood that. I would love some clarity on: the subsidy versus what? Is it just a dispute resolution piece? Is it something that's coming down from the government to cover that subsidy? If there's somebody who could provide some clarity on that question, I would be very grateful for that.

8:00

I will be voting in favour of this legislation. I think that there is a little bit of irony here, though, that has to be pointed out. We have a government that is charging a carbon tax, the largest tax in Alberta's history. We have a government that is charging extra minimum wage. We have a lot of different things that are happening from this government in that the cumulative burden on Albertans, regulations, a whole bunch of things that are impacting Albertans in their pocketbooks, their everyday lives, and their ability to do things with their families and their children, choosing heat sometimes over hockey – I mean, that's just here right now. If we go towards Ontario, that could be choosing eating versus heating your house. These are some really, really serious issues. The irony of it is that we have a bill that is concerned with making sure that people aren't getting overcharged on their bills, but ironically the government is sure doing a lot to increase what that bill looks like. I think that's something that the government needs to consider going forward.

This legislation on its own is good legislation, but I will ask again: is this legislation going to be broadened to take into consideration renewables coming online and any disputes that will be happening with that? It's going to be very complicated, I would imagine. We have new infrastructure builds. We're going to be having different types of energy coming onboard that are not necessarily consistent. They don't necessarily have a baseline of energy that you can go from. It's intermittent. It's going to come on the grid in different places and different ways. I'm curious to see if the government is going to expand this mandate to take into consideration any sort of dispute resolution that may come online as a result of renewables also being brought online.

You know, Albertans are looking at a lot of different things. They're looking at: their taxes have risen; their cost of food has gone up; activities, clothing increasing due to the passing on of transportation costs from the carbon tax. These are everyday Albertans that are being impacted every single day because the transportation of the goods and services that they need costs them more. Our ratepayers and our taxpayers are the same people. They're the ones that pay this. The increase of the minimum wage. Power bills have also climbed, and that is due to some considerable meddling by this government in the electricity market.

At the current rate the carbon tax rate is, well, depending on the day, a dollar and a half per gigajoule. Nearly half the cost of the residential gas price is a tax. An Alberta family that may face a \$100 bill for natural gas prior to their fees and charges is actually paying nearly \$45 in carbon tax. That's an interesting way of looking at it, isn't it? That's when it becomes a little bit more of a reality for the average family. It might not seem like a lot to those of us who have the privilege of being in here, but to the average family, that is a lot. While I'm glad to see that the government is taking some measures to protect Alberta consumers, I would like to highlight the fact that there's a litany of issues here that have caused poor economics. It's poor policy, it's impacting the economics of this province, and it's made things exceptionally harder for Albertans, Madam Speaker.

We will take our wins where we can get them, so thank you to the government for this legislation. If there's somebody that potentially could answer my questions with respect to broadening this legislation to renewables coming online, dispute resolution with respect to that, and also with respect to the protection of the municipalities, I would be very grateful for that.

I will be voting in favour of this bill, and I would urge my colleagues in the House to do the same. Thank you so much.



**The Deputy Speaker:** Under Standing Order 29(2)(a) any questions or comments?

Seeing none, are there any other members wishing to speak to the bill?

Are you ready for the question?

**Hon. Members:** Question.

[Motion carried; Bill 14 read a second time]

### Bill 6

#### Gaming and Liquor Statutes Amendment Act, 2018

[Adjourned debate May 10: Dr. Turner]

**The Deputy Speaker:** Any members wishing to speak to this bill?

Seeing none, are you ready for the question?

**Hon. Members:** Question.

[Motion carried; Bill 6 read a second time]

### Bill 2

#### Growth and Diversification Act

Mr. Cooper moved that the motion for second reading of Bill 2, Growth and Diversification Act, be amended by deleting all of the words after “that” and substituting the following:

Bill 2, Growth and Diversification Act, be not now read a second time because the Assembly is of the view that the government should pursue other measures to reduce the cost of doing business in the province, including the introduction of legislation to eliminate the carbon levy, which, if implemented, would make the measures proposed in the bill unnecessary.

[Debate adjourned on the amendment May 15]

**The Deputy Speaker:** The hon. Member for Chestermere-Rocky View.

**Mrs. Aheer:** Thank you, again, Madam Speaker. Whew. It’s a marathon tonight. Thank you again for the opportunity to speak on the Growth and Diversification Act. This act seeks to address current and future projected labour shortages in the tech . . .

**The Deputy Speaker:** Hon. member, we are still on the amendment, and you have spoken to the amendment already. I apologize.

**Mrs. Aheer:** Oh, pardon me. Thank you so much. I thought so. Okay. Thank you, Madam Speaker.

**The Deputy Speaker:** The hon. Member for Highwood, on the amendment.

**Mr. W. Anderson:** Thank you, Madam Speaker. Absolutely. I rise in the House today to speak on and give my support to my colleague’s reasoned amendment for Bill 2, the Growth and Diversification Act. This bill is another attempt by this government to try and diversify the economy. This bill aims to create spaces in tech programs in postsecondary institutions. It creates the framework to invest in new scholarships and tech launches, and an interactive digital media tax credit continues the Alberta investor tax credit and capital investment tax credit.

As I’ve said before in this House, I don’t have a problem with the diversification of the economy. In fact, I would be thrilled if Alberta had a strong, robust, diverse economy. However, the problem we run into is: how do we as legislators encourage the diversification

of our economy? How can we get private industry and private capital to invest in our province to get these industries going in Alberta?

Now, Bill 2 specifically looks at the tech sector as a place to encourage diversification. There’s no doubt that Alberta would certainly benefit from an increase in tech-related jobs. Furthermore, the technology sector is one of the fastest growing industries worldwide. That sounds great for Alberta. However, Madam Speaker, as I stated earlier, the question is: how do we attract this investment to our province? The problem with Bill 2 is that it uses a mix of incentives to encourage the diversity of the tech sector; in other words, incentives as taxpayer dollars. Does the government really want to spend more money that it just doesn’t have on a program that may not achieve the desired outcomes?

Alberta is in a fiscal crisis right now. The government’s latest budget proposed a deficit of almost \$9 billion. By the middle of the next decade we will be looking at Alberta’s debt hitting just shy of \$100 billion. That’s a lot of money. This is not the time to be throwing away taxpayer dollars or taxpayer money into projects that may or may not succeed. The government has attempted multiple times to try and diversify the economy. Has it worked? Well, the government keeps proposing more and more bills on diversifying the economy, so that should just give us an answer. Is the government thinking: “Well, we haven’t had any success with any of our previous economic diversification legislation, but this time it’s just going to be different. This time it’s going to produce the results.” Madam Speaker, I think that’s just unwise thinking.

Furthermore, the tax credits, the so-called incentives, proposed in Bill 2 allow the government to pick and choose winners and losers. Now, I want to let the members opposite know that the government isn’t very good at picking winners and losers. These sector-specific tax credits leave out many potential businesses that would like to access capital. However, the government has already picked which industries they want to receive the credits, so if a business doesn’t fit the specific framework of the legislation, it looks like they’re just going to be out of luck.

Albertans will be skeptical of programs like these. The NDP has had difficulty rolling out these programs in the past. There were delays and difficulties with the rollout of the Alberta investor tax credit last year, and the interactive digital media tax credit program will not have any details until late this summer. Now, how can we trust that the government will get this one right? Also, the companies that are receiving these tax credits: could they not just get this capital from the private markets? If they could get capital privately, then why would we use taxpayer dollars to support it? If companies cannot get private capital, then why not? If the private market won’t invest in these projects, why should the government?

8:10

Now, some may argue that the reason Alberta is lagging behind other provinces such as B.C. and Quebec in the tech industry is because we do not have a tech-specific tax credit. However, if we’re already far behind, how are we going to catch up?

Maybe a better solution is not to be like every other province and instead restore the Alberta advantage and make Alberta the most attractive place to invest. I’m not sure why the NDP government hasn’t learned by this point that the private sector does the best work of creating jobs. The government doesn’t create private-sector jobs; the private sector does that. What should the role of the government be? To get out of the way of job creators and create conditions that allow them to succeed. Madam Speaker, we need to stop and step back and look at why private-sector jobs are not being created. That is why I’m supporting the reasoned amendment to stop proceeding

with the waste of additional taxpayer dollars and actually address the reasons for Alberta's economic woes.

If the government was serious about seeing the results of a diverse economy, they could start with repealing the job-killing carbon tax. First off, Madam Speaker, the NDP never campaigned on the carbon tax. They had no mandate to introduce one. Secondly, the carbon tax was introduced without proper consultation or study. Did the government know the impacts of the carbon tax before they introduced it? Do they understand how detrimental this tax has been for businesses? I don't think so. I can't imagine they do. Otherwise, they would have taken the advice of the members of the opposition to repeal the tax a long time ago.

You see, Madam Speaker, the government has created an economic mess, and their solution is to spend their way out of it. Will this end? What happens if the federal government raises the carbon tax, a move, I should add, that this government is all too happy to go along with. Well, the NDP government just created more incentives. Will they waste more taxpayer money to try and achieve this so-called diversification? We all know that when the carbon tax goes up, economic activity goes down. Will the government try and spend more money to counteract the negative effects of their carbon tax? Eventually the government is going to have to realize that they cannot spend their way out of this.

We can see how much investment has decreased with the implementation of this carbon tax. What will happen when the carbon tax gets increased more and more? How much more will investment decrease? Although I'm not sure that this government knows this, with the decreased investment comes decreased tax revenue. The government is implementing policies that cause decreased tax revenue, but they're going to try, with less revenue coming in, to spend their way out of decreased economic activity with legislation such as Bill 2. To me, this is backwards thinking and will only lead to increased deficits and increased debt.

Instead, Madam Speaker, let's axe the carbon tax. Let's axe the waste of taxpayer money trying to spend our way to job creation. Rather, let's create the conditions for businesses to succeed and for investment to be welcomed. This would do far more for diversification of the economy than anything else I can think of. Has the government actually asked industry what would benefit them the most? Many business owners I've talked to say that they would benefit the most from the repeal of the carbon tax and reducing red tape, cutting out the bureaucracy, if you will. Has the government even looked into ways to reduce red tape? This is an area that they can explore that would cost very little to implement but could have large positive effects on business here in Alberta.

Less government would be a good thing, too, Madam Speaker. Less government means more economic freedom to invest, create jobs, and increase business activity. Unfortunately, the approach we've seen from the NDP, which we see in Bill 2, is to add more government and create more red tape for businesses. That doesn't attract private-sector business.

Before making this reasoned amendment, my colleague on this side of the House argued unsuccessfully to send this bill to committee. Here we could have studied the bill in depth to better understand the impacts of this bill, but unfortunately the government wanted to push through this bill and push through their ideological agenda.

In closing, Madam Speaker – and I know you wanted to hear those words – we need to show investors that Alberta is again open for business. That is why I encourage all members of this House to vote in favour of this reasoned amendment to put a halt to what the government is trying to do and step back and implement policies that'll actually help us, help the economy, and help all Albertans.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

**The Deputy Speaker:** Under Standing Order 29(2)(a), the hon. Minister of Advanced Education.

**Mr. Schmidt:** Well, thank you, Madam Speaker. It is indeed a pleasure to rise and offer some comments on the speech that we heard from the Member for Highwood. I certainly listened with great interest to what he had to say. It was particularly interesting to compare and contrast it to what the Member for Cardston-Taber-Warner had to say earlier this morning because at least the Member for Cardston-Taber-Warner had reacted to some of the comments and responses that I provided to previous speakers earlier this morning.

A number of speakers from that side have risen and claimed that because of high provincial income taxes and high provincial corporate taxes the tax structure is driving investment to other jurisdictions. Of course, I've refuted that assertion by stating to the House what the provincial corporate tax rates and income tax rates are in those jurisdictions. Across the country, Madam Speaker, taxes are higher than they are in Alberta. Provincial income taxes are higher in every other province than they are in this province. Provincial corporate taxes are comparable or higher in most of the jurisdictions that we're trying to compete with in the high-tech sector.

Other jurisdictions where we find investments in the high-tech sector in particular, Madam Speaker, also have a carbon tax. In the case of B.C., of course, the carbon tax is \$35 a tonne, so higher than the tax here in Alberta. In fact, in Quebec, although they operate on a cap-and-trade system, so it's not a direct charge to consumers, the estimated cost of the carbon tax per tonne is about \$20 a tonne, so comparable to what we're taxing in Alberta. One of the things that I neglected to mention, of course, is that we have no provincial sales tax in Alberta, and there is a significant provincial sales tax in British Columbia as well as in Quebec.

Anyway, my point is that at least the Member for Cardston-Taber-Warner reacted to the information that I brought to the floor of the Chamber refuting the notion that higher taxes in Alberta are driving out investment. It's not true, Madam Speaker. All across the board we have lower taxes than the other jurisdictions where we see development in the tech sector in particular, which is what we're trying to stimulate.

It was interesting, though, the tack that he took. He said that, in fact, it wasn't taxes, Madam Speaker, that were driving investment out; it was the environment. Then he failed, of course, to stipulate what environmental conditions in particular are driving investment out of the province. Perhaps he meant the extreme cold that we experience sometimes here in Alberta.

This just goes to show, Madam Speaker, the length to which the members opposite will cling to their ideological belief that tax rates somehow drive investment decisions, which is not necessarily what we're seeing in respect to investments in the tech sector, of course, because if that were the case, all of the tech investment would be happening here in Alberta. It wouldn't be happening in jurisdictions like British Columbia or Quebec because the taxes are higher in both of those sectors.

In the eight hours and 15 minutes since the Member for Cardston-Taber-Warner got to his feet and said that, oh, no, in fact he wasn't actually talking about tax rates, he was talking about the environment, the Member for Highwood has gone back to this fairy tale that the UCP continues to peddle that tax rates somehow drive investment. In fact, he went on at length about the corporate tax structure in Alberta driving out investment, the provincial income tax structure driving out investment.

Madam Speaker, you know, I feel like a firefighter. I feel like a firefighter of truth. Every time misinformation is created by the

other side, it's my job to get out and put it out, put it out with facts. I can see that the Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood is particularly enamoured with my metaphor, and I invite him to use this any time that he pleases because it's so effective.

Anyway, the fight against misinformation is never-ending, particularly in this House, Madam Speaker. That's why I feel compelled to stand up and remind the Member for Highwood again that we have the lowest provincial . . .

8:20

**The Deputy Speaker:** Any other members wishing to speak to the amendment? The hon. Member for Grande Prairie-Wapiti.

**Mr. Drysdale:** Thank you, Madam Speaker. I rise to support my UCP colleague's reasoned amendment to Bill 2, the Growth and Diversification Act. This bill is yet one more example of the government's lack of understanding about what Alberta's business community needs to thrive. Bill 2 creates specific tax credits for specific sectors, and once you start doing that for one sector, other sectors expect the same treatment. In the end, you end up with a multiple-layered set of narrow tax credits that may not accomplish anything.

We know that this is a problem because the government tends to have few, if any, measurables for these programs and policies. That means it creates policies before deciding what it wants them to do, and the ministries generally have no way of measuring how they're progressing. That's not a good way to create government policy. If you go down that route, it's easy to forget that you're spending taxpayers' money. Piecemeal policies like those offered in Bill 2 are good examples of that, and that's why I support the reasoned amendment that would ensure it does not proceed to any further readings.

Let me point to an example of a problem that Bill 2 purports to be fixing. This proposed legislation expands eligibility for the Alberta investor tax credit and tops it up, yet the first round of the tax credit was undersubscribed and it left \$1.4 million on the table. This might indicate that there was less interest in this tax credit than expected, which means that there wasn't necessarily a burning need for it. Another possibility is that the government was not successful in letting investors know that the pool of money even existed. Clearly, the government needs to answer these questions about this specific tax credit and determine how it's performing before serving up millions of more dollars for a new set of narrowly defined tax credits.

I think it's quite clear, Madam Speaker, that Alberta's United Conservatives look at the government's role differently. We know that the greatest gift we can give business is a strong, sustainable economy, one that does not carry around big weights such as the carbon tax. If this government really wants to help business thrive, it needs to take a broader approach. Instead of picking out specific sectors, it needs to unfetter them all and then watch them flourish.

That approach has been successful in Alberta for many decades. It made Alberta the gold standard for attracting global investment. It created jobs and prosperity. It attracted people to come from across Canada and the world who have a similar independent mindset. Albertans know that when business thrives, Alberta thrives. Unfortunately, in choosing to focus on bills like this one – that is, one with a slate of tax credits designed for a small and specific sector of our economy – this government is taking a very narrow focus.

I believe that this is the wrong approach. That's why I support this amendment. This government has a pattern of tinkering and then creating problems that require even more tinkering to fix the problems that it's created. We have seen the folly of this approach

in the way the government keeps meddling in the electricity system, to the cost of billions of taxpayers' dollars and, of course, more and more debt.

We have spent many hours debating Bill 13 in this Chamber, and you will have heard the United Conservatives describe a long list of problems with this piece of legislation. It all started with the carbon tax, which prompted the power providers to hand back their PPAs. Since then we have had multiple pieces of legislation come forward to fix the cascade of problems created by rolling that first die.

At some point, I would suggest right now, with Bill 2 the government needs to take a different tactic and a more Albertan tactic. I admit that Bill 2 is not a tremendously expensive policy decision; it's simply the wrong one. But this government continues to ignore what the larger business community asks of it. It's first job-killing move was to increase taxes on larger businesses and high-income earners. It then piled on regulations with little, if any, consultation with those affected. Then it focused on measures that increased labour costs even though businesses warned that these unexpected costs would affect the jobs it could offer Albertans.

I believe this government's priorities are backwards, and Bill 2 is a good example of the reason why I feel this way. Business is asking government to stop introducing policies that are making it less competitive. Business is not asking the government to create tax credits like those handed out in Bill 2. That is a major philosophical difference between the NDP and the UCP, Madam Speaker.

You know, Madam Speaker, we're always being accused of giving tax breaks to, I think they call it, our big, rich friends or something like that. We're not giving them tax breaks. We're just treating them the same as everyone else. A flat tax of 10 per cent is the same for everyone. We're not abusing them and chasing them away. Ten per cent of not much isn't much, but 10 per cent of a big income is a lot of money. So if you chase that away, you're losing a lot of money. I mean, for example, just look at your income on the tax side. It's gone down. You've increased the taxes, yet you've got less income. I guess maybe it's not working.

You know, these are the people that create the jobs, the people that run businesses, make money. They create the jobs, and now this government is punishing them by increasing their taxes. These people aren't stupid. That's why they are high earners in the first place. If it's not profitable and the taxes are too high, they can show a loss. In any given year you can show a loss. So then you pay zero for income tax. So instead of getting 10 per cent of quite a bit, all of a sudden you get zero. Maybe that's showing up in your budget. Not only do they do that, they show a loss, they lay off people, they lay off workers, and that's why we have unemployment. All they're asking is to be treated fairly. We don't need to give them a break; just treat them fairly like the rest of the people. But I guess if you choose to chase them away with their taxes and their jobs, that's up to you.

You know, I know that probably the Advanced Education minister is going to get up and give me the same lecture you've given my colleagues about not understanding how taxes work. I think I understand it pretty well, Madam Speaker. You know, I won't get into personal stuff, but businessmen and people on this side know what makes money in this province and know what drives the reality. Treating them poorly and chasing them away and raising their taxes isn't what's going to get Alberta back on track. We don't need to give them breaks. We just need to treat them fairly and not punish them, Madam Speaker.

So I urge all members in the Chamber to vote for this reasoned amendment for it is time to put our priorities in the right order, and Bill 2 is not the way to do that. Thank you, Madam Speaker.

**The Deputy Speaker:** On Standing Order 29(2)(a) I'll recognize Cardston-Taber-Warner.

**Mr. Hunter:** Madam Speaker, I was very interested to hear my hon. colleague talk about this bill, and I think that in comparison to the short, you know, five-minute clips that we get from the Edmonton-Gold Bar MLA, I can see why a reasonable approach here is represented on this side. The reasonable approach is that, look, we want investment to come back into this province. Now, the approach on the other side is that if we raise taxes and then do these tax boutique giveaways to some of our friends or to the people that we want, then we'll somehow magically make the economy work and get people back to work. Unfortunately, history has proven that that does not work. It's not a sustainable, long-term approach. As I listened, I heard a reasonable approach, which is: let's take a look at what has worked in the past, and then even if we need to tweak it a little bit, apply that because we know it works. We don't have to try to reinvent the wheel. We just have to be able to be conservative in this approach.

8:30

The nice thing about what happened in the past is – I know that the members opposite love to say how it's been terrible for 44 years here.

**Mr. Coolahan:** Agreed.

**Mr. Hunter:** And here's the heckle: agreed.

Now, here's the interesting thing about it. A majority of the people on that side moved to this province because of what Alberta actually provides for them. When I hear them say that it didn't work for 44 years, it's a hypocritical argument because they moved to this province to be able to get what the Alberta advantage offered.

Now, Madam Speaker, here's a situation where we have the members opposite speaking out of both sides of their mouths. First of all, they're saying: "You know what? Let's champion Alberta." But they're saying: "No. Alberta is terrible. It's broken." No, Alberta isn't broken. It was broken when they got in. That's exactly the reason that these guys are in the numbers in the polls that they are. That is what I hear constantly from business owners and from people who are just trying to be able to provide for their families. All they want is to be able to have some gainful employment, to be able to get back to this thing we called the Alberta advantage.

If the Alberta NDP government would just practise a principle called salutary neglect, which is that the government gets out of the way. I would like them to look that up afterwards, and then we can talk about it. This is the sort of thing that they need to do. This is

what I hear from businesses. Businesses say: "The government needs to stop doing harm to the economy. They need to get out of the way. We know how to be able to create gainful employment. We want people to be able to be involved in our businesses, we want people to be able to provide adequately for their families, and we want to be able to pay them more than a \$15-an-hour wage."

This is the sort of thing that Albertans have been great at. This is the sort of thing that Albertans – look, I've lived here almost all my life, and the great thing about Alberta is that it's been really good to my family. But what is it going to do for my children and grandchildren? Saddle them with \$96 billion of debt? That's not the kind of legacy that I want to leave them, Madam Speaker.

This is the argument that I hear from the side opposite, this idea that they know best. I said it earlier, Madam Speaker. It is an arrogant approach. It is an arrogant idea or belief that you know better than a very complex economy – a very complex economy – one of the most complex in the world right here, and these guys know best how to be able to create tax boutiques to somehow start and make this thing work better.

Madam Speaker, I'm not trying to be rude to the members. I've said this before. They are some of the nicest people, some of them are some of the nicest people that I know. The problem is that they will not be judged by their intentions, because they would get As for their intentions. What they will be judged for are their outcomes. Have they been able to do what they promised? They sold hope and change like nobody's business, but were they able to deliver on that hope and change? I can tell you that they were not.

**The Deputy Speaker:** Any other members wishing to speak to the amendment?

Seeing none, you're ready for the question?

The hon. Minister of Transportation, on the amendment.

**Mr. Mason:** Yes, Madam Speaker. Sorry to be a little slow getting to my feet. I would move that we adjourn debate.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

**Mr. Mason:** Well, I don't usually believe in miracles, Madam Speaker, but we've accomplished a great deal tonight. I would like to thank all hon. members for that and move that we adjourn the House until 9 o'clock tomorrow morning.

[Motion carried; the Assembly adjourned at 8:35 p.m.]





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