



Province of Alberta

The 30th Legislature
First Session

Alberta Hansard

Tuesday morning, December 3, 2019

Day 51

The Honourable Nathan M. Cooper, Speaker

Legislative Assembly of Alberta
The 30th Legislature

First Session

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Legislative Assembly of Alberta

10 a.m.

Tuesday, December 3, 2019

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

Prayers

The Deputy Speaker: Morning, hon. members.

Let us pray. Lord, the God of righteousness and truth, grant to our Queen and her government, to Members of the Legislative Assembly, and to all in positions of responsibility the guidance of Your spirit. May they never lead the province wrongly through love of power, desire to please, or unworthy ideas but, laying aside all private interests and prejudices, keep in mind their responsibility to seek to improve the condition of all. So may Your kingdom come and Your name be hallowed. Amen.

Hon. members, please be seated.

Orders of the Day

Government Bills and Orders

Third Reading

Bill 29

Municipal Government (Machinery and Equipment Tax Incentives) Amendment Act, 2019

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Municipal Affairs.

Mr. Madu: Thank you so much, Madam Speaker. I am pleased to rise and move third reading on Bill 29, the Municipal Government (Machinery and Equipment Tax Incentives) Amendment Act, 2019.

Madam Speaker, this legislation would help municipalities compete internationally to attract investment, create jobs, build the economy, and realize their full economic potential. Our government believes that municipalities should be empowered to make decisions that work in their region. The legislation that we are proposing is concise. Bill 29 would expand the powers of municipal councils to create property tax incentive programs similar to Bill 7, passed in the spring, but for machinery and equipment assessment class.

Municipalities know what their local opportunities and barriers are. We know competition is tough for large industrial projects. Too often they have been heading south of the border. This gives one more tool to local governments to attract big job creators. If passed, Madam Speaker, Bill 29 would allow municipalities to provide property tax incentives for up to 15 years for machinery and equipment. This would give our province a competitive advantage over jurisdictions across Canada and the United States. Other jurisdictions have programs like this in place. Saskatchewan and British Columbia as well as Texas and Louisiana are some of the examples. If passed, we would be helping municipalities with the flexibility to offer, if they wish, one of the longest tax incentive timelines in North America.

Some individuals and groups may disagree with the proposed legislation, thinking that it may lead to increased competition between municipalities, but Madam Speaker, I have been clear that increased competition is exactly what we are looking for. Alberta has been losing these competitions, and we need to turn that around. We have seen investments, for example, in petrochemicals moving south of the border to the tune of nearly \$200 billion. We need to position our province to make sure that it is attracting some of those investments. I am proud to introduce this as one more way that our government is restoring the Alberta advantage.

Thank you, Madam Speaker. With that, I formally move third reading on Bill 29.

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. members, are there any other members wishing to speak? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview.

Mr. Bilous: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. It's my pleasure to rise and speak to Bill 29. I appreciate that the minister got up and spoke, and I do want to speak to a number of the points that he raised, number one being that this is going to make municipalities more competitive. What it's going to do is encourage municipalities in a race to the bottom. I can tell you that the petrochemicals – the minister is correct that there's about \$200 billion worth of investment around – actually it's higher than that. Internationally and within North America there has been about \$200 billion worth of investment. Companies are eager to invest, but I promise you that reducing machinery and equipment is not going to attract them to Alberta.

What has – and this minister knows this and the gas minister knows this – is the petrochemical diversification program, a program that I'm very proud we introduced under our government, that has seen two projects well under way, Inter Pipeline and Canada Kuwait, both building facilities to the tune of somewhere between 3 and a half billion to \$5 billion, resulting in thousands of jobs and, of course, adding value to our resources, which is something that Albertans have been talking about. I remember sitting around the kitchen table when I was a kid, my parents talking about: why don't we diversify and upgrade more of our resources here in the province?

Those two programs have been very successful. I am happy to see that this government has removed ideology on this decision and has continued the program because it is successful and it's those types of programs that will attract these billions of dollars of investment. It is not getting municipalities to reduce or forgo collecting machinery and equipment.

Again, I've met with dozens of these companies around the globe, and they've talked about levelling the playing field, and a program like royalty credits did just that, Madam Speaker. So I do encourage the government to continue to look at programs like that. In fact, I'm anticipating that there should be a beautiful \$10 billion announcement right around the corner with a company that we had lined up that never got it out the door. I won't spoil it for Albertans as far as which company I believe that'll be, but I look forward to those types of announcements.

The challenge with this, Madam Speaker – and it's quite possible that there are some municipalities who asked for this, but I can tell the Minister of Municipal Affairs that with the councillors and communities that I've been meeting with, you've already seen a complete shift in their approach in how they are working with the other municipalities. It is now cutthroat. I think there are 342 municipalities in the province of Alberta, unless a few have been amalgamated and that number is a little bit lower. You have 342 little fiefdoms, all competing with each other. Well, the problem with this is that when you go international – and the ministers that have travelled will know this – we have to work together to put Alberta on the map, let alone a little community here or there that is trying to compete internationally on the world stage.

What's disappointing to see is the work that we did to encourage municipalities to collaborate in order to compete, to look at how regionally they can work together in order to attract these big investments. You know, my concern, Madam Speaker, is that the tools that the Minister of Municipal Affairs has introduced have flipped that on its head. So municipalities are working together a lot

less. They've loosened the rules on intermunicipal IDPs, on intermunicipal collaboration agreements, and it's unfortunate.

The other thing that we've seen this government do – and they may praise this ability that they've given municipalities, but I think many municipalities are feeling frustrated that this government is downloading services on to municipalities, so, again, cuts to police funding. And I get that the Minister of Justice loves to say that we're not cutting it. I'm sorry; it's in black in white. Yes, you are. So municipalities have less to work with, and then saying to them, "Now you need to drop your tax rate to be more competitive," even though that's the only tool they have to pay for things like roads and bridges and infrastructure and policing. I mean, for the smaller municipalities, obviously, it's the province that picks up that tab.

It's challenging, Madam Speaker. I mean, municipalities collect less than 10 cents on the dollar from taxes, yet deliver the majority of services, and this government continues to point to municipalities and say: well, lower your tax rate; continue to drop them. Those are the same taxes that municipalities use to provide services. You know, I'm sure municipalities are thinking: well, then, fund us; sure, we'll drop the machinery and equipment tax rate, we'll drop our property tax rate, but make sure that we have the dollars to deliver services that Albertans count on.

The other thing, you know, Madam Speaker, is that if you gut all of the infrastructure, trade corridors, and what companies rely on, you could have the lowest tax rate in the world, but if you don't have ways and means for companies to get their products and services to market, they're not coming here. You know, I encourage the government to talk to companies, especially down in the U.S., that we're trying to attract, and listen to their top three priorities. I can tell you that quality of life is in the top three for most companies. What is that? That's things like having an incredible health care system: affordable, publicly delivered, publicly funded health care. I can tell you that companies spend significant dollars down in the U.S. paying their employees' share of health care, so they look to Canada with envy. I can tell you that for most companies talent is in their top three as well, Madam Speaker.

10:10

Now, I know in our energy sector, obviously, natural resources – you know, they need to go where the natural resources are. I'd like to see this government work with municipalities to help support them to make Alberta more competitive. Again, I've talked to the Minister of Energy a couple of times on the fact that they are working with the Alberta Energy Regulator to expedite approvals of projects. That gets a check mark. Way to go. That is positive. We need to do that. We know that that will help to attract companies. We know that business moves at the speed of light and government is a turtle, and that's probably even being generous to government, how slow government moves. But those are the types of levers or signals, I think, that industry is looking for and will approve.

I mean, we are definitely in challenging times. You see that Husky just made an announcement where Albertans, 370 of them, are losing their jobs. You know, I hope this makes the government stop and reflect on the fact that what they believed would be a silver bullet for the industry, by dropping the corporate tax rate, has not had the outcomes that they've expected. Anybody over there who says: "No. It's doing exactly what we said it would do." Well, point to the jobs, because I only see job losses. Now, I appreciate that others may say, including the Premier: "Well, wait a couple of years. We've got to wait until this thing ramps up." Okay. So in the meantime we just sit, twiddle our thumbs, and watch layoff after layoff occur?

I'll tell you what tool would have helped attract more investment, especially in oil and gas: the capital investment tax credit. That's

something that this government blindly cut. I believe it was an ideological cut, again, you know, the government has access to the numbers, Madam Speaker. We know that \$200 million leveraged \$2.2 billion worth of investment. That's a fantastic return on investment. For me, what's tough is that that was a tool that would have helped do what the minister is trying to accomplish through allowing municipalities to lower their machinery and equipment, what they collect.

There are tools that the government had, and I encourage the government to look at the capital investment tax credit and consider bringing back some iteration of it. I mean, I understand that the government will want its brand on the program. I can tell you that business doesn't care who introduces it as long as there are those types of program, just like the PDP. I'm sure, you know, companies in Japan and elsewhere aren't saying: "Oh, okay. It's a different program because there's a different government in place." They don't care. They just want to see that these types of programs are there to level the playing field.

I mean, this is exactly it, although it is interesting when you hear the government, for certain programs, talk about how that's picking winners and losers, yet for other programs, that doesn't really count, right? I mean, the minister of economic development and trade criticized the investor tax credit, the capital investment tax credit, and the interactive digital media tax credit, calling them all boutique tax credits, yet the film tax credit: "No. That's not a boutique one. That doesn't count." It's a double standard.

Now, I'm in favour of all of them. Again, I've said this to the minister, that I agree and applaud the government's decision to look at a film tax credit. I know that they've met with a lot of industry members to tweak it, because with their first iteration they don't have it right. But, again, you know what? I'll give them a chance to improve it. I can speak from experience that when we first rolled out the investor tax credit, it had some challenges. We went back to the investment community and talked to them, and they said: you know, we need to iron out some wrinkles, and we did. I was quite proud of the fact that, again, we continued to listen to industry to ensure that we got it right. So I hope, with all sincerity, Madam Speaker, that they will do the same for the film tax credit. I think there's incredible potential for Alberta to compete with jurisdictions like British Columbia and Quebec and Ontario. Again, I hope for and encourage this government to review a capital investment tax credit.

Now, something the government did – and I'll give credit to the Minister of Finance – was accelerate the capital cost allowance. We know that that is a tool that has worked in the past. We have a track record across Canada when that occurs. I know the federal government did it, but I am happy to see that the province is also doing that in order to encourage companies to invest now.

But, again, you know, the silver bullet of reducing the corporate tax rate has not produced the results, and I think it's fair to say that it has not produced the results that the government is anticipating. Again, Husky took their roughly \$250 million that they got in tax savings or in the forgone taxes they didn't have to pay and then invested it elsewhere. Meanwhile in Alberta, the very province that gave them this gift, they say, "Yeah, we're actually going to cut our investments by about \$500 million, and that's going to result in about 270 job losses," which is unfortunate. I appreciate the fact that nobody in this House wants to hear of a single job loss. We all understand the implications of that. I hope what it does is cause the government to reflect on putting all of their eggs in one basket versus looking at: what are some other ways to improve?

Now, I know the minister of red tape will get up and say: we've done all this red tape reduction. As we've spoken about, Madam Speaker, half the bill that he brought forward isn't about red tape.

You know, eliminating a board off the books which hasn't met for 10-plus years is not red tape. I don't know whose red tape you're cutting or for whom. I do think, as I've pointed out, that working with the AER, working with Environment and Parks to look at expediting approvals: that's reducing red tape. That's making it easier and faster for companies to pull the trigger. Again, we've all heard of examples of companies that have had to wait far too long for approvals, and we know that capital doesn't wait. It'll go to jurisdictions that are eager to have those investments.

This is why I encourage the other side to also look at something that we did that I'm quite proud of, working with three different municipalities up in northwestern Alberta, the trimunicipal partnership between the MD of Greenview, the county of Grande Prairie, and the city of Grande Prairie. They came to the government and said, "We'd like to basically form an industrial zone and look at getting some of those initial approvals out of the way so that we can go to industry, so that we can go on international trade missions and say to companies: we have a plug-and-play model, so we can bring you in and get you up and running in a much shorter time frame than if you had to start from scratch; then you'd have to deal with multiple municipalities." We gave them some funding through the CARES program, which, again, is another program this government cut, which was having a real impact on communities all over Alberta. In fact, you know who got hit the hardest? The rural communities that were accessing the CARES funding.

Regardless, the fact is that we worked with those municipalities to help get them up and going when it comes to creating a regional economic zone. I encourage the Minister of Energy, the Minister of Municipal Affairs, and the Minister of Environment and Parks, which is what we did – it took three of us to get together; actually, it was four of us – to look at helping to make this happen. I said it when I was Minister of Municipal Affairs: I hope to see that replicated throughout the province.

You know, the ministers will know that there's a great example of municipal collaboration, regional collaboration, with the Industrial Heartland. They came with me on every single trade mission that I led and helped advertise and support the petrochemicals diversification program. Of course, the heartland has attracted billions of dollars of investment, including through the PDP program. Now, theirs is a little different model because that was private land, not Crown land, that they came together on, but I can tell you, Madam Speaker, that it's still – and I've said to the AIHA – a shining example of what can be accomplished when municipalities work together.

10:20

The challenge I have with this current bill – and I appreciate the intention of this bill and what the minister is trying to do – is that it will encourage a continued race to the bottom, a race for municipalities to undercut each other in order to try to attract investment. I'm a big fan of, again, "Let's collaborate to compete; let's work together as Team Alberta to compete on the international stage," not "Let's argue with each other and try to fight with each other to attract investment." That's not going to do it, Madam Speaker.

When we look at the best examples of where investments have come, you look down south, near Lethbridge, to the Cavendish investment, the largest of its kind in southern Alberta. That took six of our ministers working together, working with the company, but the company also worked with the city of Lethbridge and the county of Lethbridge because they recognized that a rising tide lifts all boats and that by working together, attracting that kind of investment will benefit residents in both municipalities. I mean, the reality is that most people don't identify themselves according to the invisible municipal boundaries, right? They identify themselves

through their communities, so that type of investment of Cavendish, which was hundreds of millions of dollars, benefits the whole southwest region of the province.

With that, Madam Speaker, I just wanted to get on the record. Again, I'm happy to give credit where credit is due, but I'm also happy to point out, when there are and were successful programs, that if it ain't broke, don't fix it, you know, as that applies to the capital investment tax credit and some other tools that, unfortunately, the government has taken away.

With that, I will take my seat. Thank you, Madam Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: Are there any other members wishing to speak? Hon. Minister of Municipal Affairs, you've already spoken to this bill. I'm looking for other speakers to the bill.

The hon. minister for Lac Ste. Anne-Parkland.

Mr. Getson: Not minister, but thank you for the promotion, Madam Speaker. Given the communications back and forth, I don't know if I'd want that chair, quite honestly.

There was an old saying in my area: if you lay with dogs, it's going to give you fleas. Well, that holds true in a lot of this. We've heard about some of the things in setting up the economy. Folks are kind of wondering why we have investment leaving the country, and actually, honestly, I think the NDP should stand up and take a bow. You don't poison the well of investment, you don't send these mixed messages, again with the partners down in Ottawa, and then wonder why people are leaving. If there's any question or wondering why it was after October 21 that a lot of these big companies decided to leave, it was literally that the Trudeau government got in place. Again, I stood up here on the 17th talking about some of those inconsistencies and some of the concerns about unifying our country. Well, this is proof. You have long-standing Canadian companies that are hesitant about keeping their headquarters here.

As far as talking on, you know, Bill 29, consultation is ongoing. There are going to be a few bumps and bruises along the way, but the intent of this is fantastic. I heard the member opposite just talking about collaboration, or lack thereof, of some municipalities. Here's something that I got from folks, actually, in the economic trade and development office. Again, the other member opposite had actually been in charge of that group. I brought two county mayors together and an investment group over from Asia. Their name is XCMG, and they're the number 5 equipment manufacturer in the world. I brought all of them to the table. I also had our Member of Parliament, Dane Lloyd, there as well. These people from economic and trade development asked me at the end of the meeting: how did this happen? How did this happen, Madam Speaker? Well, it happened because one MLA took the initiative to talk to people in his area, to get to know these mayors, to have them collaboratively come together. There was no animosity amongst them because everyone is looking collaboratively now towards regional development.

One of the councillors from Sturgeon was actually over on a trade mission under Sturgeon county's flag themselves and ended up over at XCMG's headquarters and started promoting Nisku, started promoting all the good things that we can do down in Nisku, from the oil field to helping manufacture this equipment.

We also had meetings with the other mayors. We had Leduc county onboard; we had Sturgeon county; we had Strathcona county; we had Parkland county. These are all folks that are working together in this regional development anyway with the heartland development. Mayor Hnatiw is absolutely on the tip of the spear on this, leading this. We have the Villeneuve landing network. We're talking about building up Villeneuve for industrial

space. We're talking about corridors that actually tie in with highway 60, that goes all the way down to highway 2 and takes all of that trade into consideration.

Again, are these folks going to race to the bottom and cut each other's throats? Not from what I've seen, Madam Speaker, and not from some of these departments. These folks span elections, and they're coming back and asking me, a humble new MLA to the area, "How is this happening?" I said, "Because we invited them to work regionally."

Perhaps under different leadership the group worked differently, but all I know is that right now things are actually starting to come together. Minister, thank you very much for your efforts in this. The folks in my area appreciate it. Honestly, consultation is going to be ongoing while we get through this, but it's all with the right intent.

Again, with me coming from that other industry, yeah, I know why everyone is hesitant. We've been sending mixed messages. But the leadership right now is coming across at the provincial level. We've seen that in spades with the Premier's announcement yesterday of his meeting with his cohorts. Thank you very much for the ability to stand up on this, Minister. The folks in our area are behind you. Keep doing what you're doing. We need to get the investment back.

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. members, Standing Order 29(2)(a) is available.

Seeing none, any other members wishing to speak?

Seeing none, hon. Minister of Municipal Affairs, would you like to close debate?

Mr. Madu: Yes, Madam Speaker. Thank you so much. You know, we have gone through a period of economic stagnation in the last four years, a period where we saw a record lack of investor confidence in our province, especially with respect to our vital economic interests, as a consequence of policies that were pursued by the previous NDP government.

Madam Speaker, there is a reason why in the last four years what we saw was companies leaving our province. Rather than attracting investment, investors and businesspeople were telling us that unless we make a fundamental shift, it will be hard and difficult for them to bet their hard-earned dollars on an economy and especially a government that was pursuing antibusiness policies. Businesses are very much interested in an economic system that isn't layer upon layer of red tape. The ease with which they do business is one of the things that they are looking for. In this type of environment in which we find ourselves, we are faced with the harsh reality that more than \$200 billion in investment has gone to the south in petrochemicals, an investment, or at least a good chunk of it, that ought to have come to this particular province given the blessings of our huge natural resources in both fossil fuel and natural gas.

Madam Speaker, with policies like bills C-48, C-69, and the previous government's support for a federal NDP leader that was sworn to the destruction of our fossil fuel industry and who was adamant that they would not support the construction of any new pipeline, it's no wonder, then, that those investments were not prepared to come to our province. We saw a record six credit downgrades. So there is a lot that we have to do, and this is just one part of our effort to make sure that we restore investor confidence and assure the business community that our province is once again open for business.

Madam Speaker, with that, I will seek the permission of this House to close debate.

[Motion carried; Bill 29 read a third time]

Government Bills and Orders Committee of the Whole

[Mrs. Pitt in the chair]

The Chair: Hon. members, I'd like to call the Committee of the Whole to order.

Bill 21 Ensuring Fiscal Sustainability Act, 2019

The Chair: Are there any members wishing to speak to the bill?

Seeing none, I will call on – the hon. Member for St. Albert would like to speak to the bill?

Ms Renaud: We had a little mix-up with the order, Madam Chair, but I'm happy to speak to Bill 21, Ensuring Fiscal Sustainability Act, 2019.

I don't know if other members in the Chamber know that today is the International Day of Persons with Disabilities. The United Nations has been marking this day since the early 1990s. It's been a while, and I do think that we've made quite a bit of progress internationally, certainly in Canada.

10:30

Before I get into this bill I do want to recognize, although members opposite like to slam the Trudeau government – I certainly have done my fair share of that as well, but I would like to give credit where credit is due – that the federal government did see fit to pass federal legislation around accessibility for people with disabilities, and that was a long time coming. I think, you know, it's not often that I would say that the United States is so far ahead of us in this regard, but they are. They actually have had the Americans with Disabilities Act for quite some time. Although the federal legislation certainly didn't go as far as I would have liked, it is a beginning. I did want to mention that.

Today is International Day of Persons with Disabilities, and I think that again we're reminded that the goal of this celebration, the United Nations calling attention to this, is that it looks at the leadership and empowerment and inclusion of persons with disabilities, particularly here as disabled Albertans, but it looks at the empowerment and inclusion of people with disabilities around the world.

Of course, one of the largest barriers, challenges, that faces this particular group of people is poverty. I know that I talk about this frequently, that grinding poverty is actually, sadly, the norm for far too many Albertans who have severe disabilities, people that have qualified for AISH but not just AISH. As we know, there are income supports also available to people for whom, for whatever reason, the barrier is too significant for them to sustain employment and then sustain themselves going forward. They qualify for income support when they're not able to qualify for AISH.

I'm going back to this again. One of the things that we did before the 30th Legislature, one of the things we all did in this place, and I do believe we all voted on together, was to make changes to the AISH Act that would allow those benefits as well as income support benefits and benefits for seniors to be indexed to inflation. Although it's not a great deal of money every single year – it's probably between \$30 and \$35 given, you know, the situation – it is a game changer. More than that, the act of actually legislating that benefits are indexed to inflation is a message to the community of people with disabilities, to their families, and to their allies that it's about respect.

It's about taking the onus off this community of having to advocate all the time for a raise. It's sort of like, you know, that job

maybe that you had when you were younger where there wasn't a lot of structure in place in terms of wage grids going up or performance evaluations that would set targets, and then you would evaluate those and determine your increase based on that information. You had to go in and sort of beg for a raise: "Hey, I'm doing a really good job. I really need a raise." This is very similar.

This was us saying to this community: "We value you enough. We understand that the cost of living pressures go up every single year, and this is why we're doing it. We're legislating that you will no longer have to advocate or beg or wait for government to determine at what point we say that, yes, our economy is successful and strong enough that we can do this." Because I'll tell you that that changes year to year. People's plans change, government's sort of desire for different outcomes change, but what never changes is the poverty, the grinding poverty that people with disabilities live with. For us, this was a way to legislate that respect and mandate that every government respect this community enough to ensure that they had these cost of living increases every single year.

But we took it even further than that, which was outstanding, Madam Chair. For those of us that were here prior to the recent election, I think we all remember the lengthy debate that we had around trusts for people with disabilities. We refer to them as Henson trusts, as they've been called in other jurisdictions. These are discretionary and nondiscretionary trusts that are set up. This was one more way of ensuring that people with disabilities, once their loved ones – their guardians, their families, whoever it was – were gone, would still have sort of that backstop or that cushion or that safety net. That would be there for them and would not have been eroded through eligibility requirements or different levels. That would have been safe. It would not have been used to calculate whether or not they were eligible for AISH benefits. It would just be there. You know, I said this the last time I spoke to this bill, Madam Chair. Before we did that in Alberta, I believe we were the only jurisdiction in this country that didn't have provisions for this kind of safety for people with disabilities.

The reason I'm highlighting these things again is that one of the things that was most shocking to me about Bill 21 was that not only was this a massive piece of legislation that shoved in every kind of thing you can imagine – I think that about 19 or 20 different pieces of legislation are amended or changed – but that these really important decisions that were made by the last Legislature would not be given this really sober second thought about: what does this mean for people? Really, what does it mean? Well, \$30 to \$35 for you and me: with the income that we have, we likely won't see that; we likely won't feel the difference. But for somebody living on just over \$1,600 a month or, even worse, for someone on income support with barriers living on less than \$900 a month, losing \$30 to \$35 is a big deal. For families losing the guarantee, the assurance, that these trust accounts will not be used, that they will not be suctioned away, that they will not be used for eligibility – now that's gone.

I'm incredibly sad that throughout this debate so far I've not heard a government member stand up and address these questions. I ask again: if you don't intend to harm the integrity of the progress made for AISH recipients, why are you moving these provisions and these protections from legislation, which is law, into regulation? It's sort of the same story with: why would you cut AISH? "Well, we didn't cut AISH." Well, you did cut AISH; you just are using different language to describe it. You can call it deindex, whatever you like. The reality is that going forward, you have reduced the support that the government of Alberta is providing to disabled Albertans right across the province. That's a fact. I'm incredibly sad that not one government member has answered any specific questions about this. I've asked about

deindexing. I've asked about Henson trusts. I have asked about all of these things. We know that the disability community and the advocates have said: this is not good; don't do this.

I believe that there's a great deal of respect for a provincial organization called Inclusion Alberta. This group, actually, by the way, was the group that advocated for many years to get this done. This group has publicly said that if the government does what they are able to do by moving this protection into regulation, they will go forward with legal action. That leads me to believe that there is a concern. I also believe that there was a post from a law firm – I think it's a Calgary law firm – that also addressed the Henson trusts and the inherent danger of moving these protections and provisions from legislation into regulation.

Still, not one government member has stood up and explained why on earth they would take these protections and provisions from the law, from the AISH Act, and move them into regulations. Why? What is the plan? If there's nothing to worry about, if there's nothing to see here, why on earth would you do that? I can't imagine that the government is looking for more work for no reason. I'm quite sure that you have enough to repeal, undo, and take backwards. Like, why would you do this?

10:40

You know, some of the other things that are also incredibly alarming to me – again, I have heard from government members the same information: no, no; don't worry; it'll be fine. Okay. I would really like to be reassured that everything will be fine, but I don't understand why you would take these things from the act and move them into regulation if you have no intention whatsoever of addressing (a) the definition of severe handicap and (b) eligibility, the eligibility of spouses or cohabiting partners. All of the benefits that are taken into consideration when eligibility for AISH is determined, things I mentioned the last time I spoke to this bill, things like death benefits, things like scholarships and bursaries: all of these things are critically important to eradicating poverty, which is, sadly, still in this day and age one of the biggest challenges that disabled Albertans face right across this province.

You know, there were a lot of things that we invested in for people with disabilities to start to chip away at this poverty that has been built up, secured, almost institutionalized over the last I don't know how many decades. What we're seeing is a systematic draw backwards. Whereas we finally got protection in the AISH Act – finally – now it's gone. Why? Why does no person from the government benches have the ability, the authority, the moral compass to stand up and explain this? Not just to me, because I'm actually not on AISH. I don't have a family member on AISH. Explain it to Albertans.

I know that every single one of the people that have been elected to serve in this place represents disabled Albertans – I know every single one of you do – and their families and their allies. You owe them an explanation. You don't owe me an explanation, clearly, but you owe them an explanation as to why you would systematically remove the progress and the protections that we installed in the AISH Act and move them to regulation when you didn't have to. You really didn't. You could have actually taken us in the other direction and made it even stronger. There are other things in play around employment that relate to AISH. There are other things in play around income supports that would do really unique things for people with disabilities to move them forward instead of squarely planting them in the poverty that is their reality today.

In one piece of omnibus legislation you've managed to take us backwards in, I don't know, 20 different areas, one of which, of huge concern to Albertans, is related to AISH. Can you imagine for people, for disabled Albertans, to think: okay; well, the government

is not cutting AISH this year. We saw their budget. We saw their projections for the next few years, and what we have established – and this is fact, right? These are not speaking points. This is fact based on your own documents. AISH increases to the overall AISH program will not increase in the out-years.

Yes, you did cover everything you needed to cover, the growth and all of that this year, which is great, and I've said that before, but in the out-years the per cent of growth that is required because AISH intake – people move to Alberta; people turn 18. They become eligible for AISH benefits. That intake, that growth, does not match your budget in the next few years. Clearly, there is something in play. There is something being planned to address that shortfall. The government has been fairly clear about not reducing the actual AISH benefit amounts, which is great. I'll take them at their word. But what else is planned? You've removed provisions within the AISH Act around eligibility, around protection in terms of discretionary and nondiscretionary trusts. You've actually removed the ability to define what is a severe handicap right from the act.

As you know, maybe for new members that aren't quite aware, when something is in the act, it is enforced and monitored, and there is oversight in a very different way than when something is in regulation. When something is in regulation, although, yes, there are some steps that have to be taken – if you are vigilant and watching, you'll be able to see what happens – we don't debate it in this place. We were all sent here to represent people. This place is where we have robust debate about what is being planned and what has been introduced, but you've now removed the ability to do that.

Madam Chair, once again I'm incredibly disappointed. I'm disappointed, number one, in the enormity of the changes being proposed and, well, the unwillingness of government to actually just say it. If that's what you're doing, own it, just stand up and say: "Yeah, that's what we're doing. Yeah, that's what we're planning. Could be we might be cutting this. We might be changing how you qualify for AISH. We might be changing how you define 'severe disability.' Yes, we're doing all of these things, and that's why we've moved this stuff out of legislation into regulation."

I've heard nothing, just crickets. So we are left to wonder: what is going on? You don't owe me an explanation, but you sure as heck owe your constituents an explanation. If you choose to continue to ignore them, you will get the blowback. I have no doubt about that.

With that, Madam Chair, I am going to end my comments and pass it on to my colleagues. Thanks.

The Chair: Are there any other members wishing to speak? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Member Loyola: Thank you very much, Madam Chair. It's always an honour to get up in the House and speak to bills and specifically Bill 21, Ensuring Fiscal Sustainability Act, 2019. I've gotten up several times in this House to speak about the differences in perspective that we all have. I appreciate that our colleagues from across the way and over here to our right have a specific way of looking at the world and what they deem to be the most appropriate way for moving forward. I have no doubt that they honestly believe that they are making the economy better. But where we begin to differ is: who actually has to pay for making those changes moving into the future? What we see with Bill 21, Ensuring Fiscal Sustainability Act, is that so many of the costs are passed on to Albertans, not only just Albertans in general but also in some cases the most vulnerable Albertans.

I've gotten up in this House several times to speak about my constituents and the makeup of my constituents. A lot of them are

young families. Also, a lot of them are new Canadians, that have come here to Canada to establish themselves so that they can provide a better future for themselves and for their children, many of them with the hopes that their children will be able to go to university and receive a much better education than perhaps they would have back in their country of origin.

So they're happy to be here, to immigrate to Canada, to now call Alberta their home and set up and establish their roots here, just like many other Canadians have done. They come here as immigrants, establish themselves, start businesses, contribute to the economy and to society as a whole, and really make sure that they're contributing because they want to be able to live here in a successful way, live up to a certain standard of living. What we see with Bill 21 is that it's eroding that standard of living for people who are working two, three jobs.

Now, I identify so much with these immigrant families because, of course, as I've shared before in the House but I'll share again, my parents came here fleeing violence in South America. For 17 years they worked two jobs. You know, for me, this is what bothers me, I'll say, Madam Chair, that so many people on the right side of the political spectrum will criticize people on the left as being lazy or that we don't want to work hard enough or that we don't know what real hard work is when nothing can be further from the truth.

10:50

My parents came here. They had their day jobs, which they worked for eight, eight and a half hours a day, sometimes nine. They would come home, they'd make dinner quickly, and then they were back out the door once again. My mother and father worked for 17 years doing janitorial service just so that they could make ends meet, so that they could pay the mortgage, make sure that we had enough to go to school, make sure that we would never have to go without.

These are the kinds of Albertans that call Alberta home, new Canadians that are here working hard each and every day. You know, so many times we hear from other Albertans that these new Canadians are just coming here to live off the system. I'm sure that there are some bad apples out there – I'm sure – but the grand majority of all these new Canadians that are coming here are coming here to contribute and give over and above to make sure that this economy continues to function.

So it's at their service that we as a government should be inside this House making sure that we are helping them out as they continue to forge forward in building a better life for themselves and for their children. Of course, with Bill 21, Ensuring Fiscal Sustainability Act, again – I repeat – it's affecting in some cases the most vulnerable of Albertans. As my colleague from St. Albert discussed at length, with the deindexing of AISH it's going to affect people who are the most marginalized. The most marginalized.

But in terms of university students – well, first, let me say this. I get where the perspective of the colleagues on the other side is coming from. They expected that their \$4.7 billion corporate handout was going to create jobs. The reality of the fact, though, is that not one job has been created through this whole process, and instead – hey, you know, what I just find unfathomable is the fact that we continue to have members from the UCP get up inside this House and continue to criticize us and blame us for so many of these companies that are leaving this jurisdiction when they've already given money out to some of these corporations to give them the incentive to stay here.

Instead, what do we see? They're taking that money, and they're investing it in other jurisdictions across Canada and North America, and they're actually leaving. Under your government they're leaving. Under your government they are leaving Alberta. So what

do you say to that? Your incentives don't seem to be working. I mean, you can be like: oh; okay; well, you guys were in government for the last four years, so you created the conditions. Well, now you're in the driver's seat, guys. You're in the driver's seat, and your corporate handout hasn't produced one new job yet.

In fact, there are so many people being laid off in the private sector. Not only that, we have people in the public sector now being laid off. Universities are laying off sessional professors. We've got teachers' assistants being laid off in the education system, teachers themselves. Classrooms are growing. All to pay for this \$4.7 billion no-jobs corporate handout, and now Albertans are going to have to pay through Bill 21, what you've called the Ensuring Fiscal Sustainability Act.

I get it. We've got to live according to our means. I get it, but at the same time: who are you asking to make the sacrifices? Now, there are people in our society, in our province who can afford to pay just a little bit more. I remember being on the doorstep and talking to some of these people, doctors in my community who were like: "You know what? I don't mind. I don't mind having to pay a little bit more under a progressive taxation system. I don't mind doing that because I do have the means to give a little bit more so that we can continue building and moving Alberta forward." But under Bill 21 we're asking the most vulnerable people to sacrifice.

Now, I don't know what it's like to live on AISH. I have no idea. I'm sure that there are a lot of people out there on AISH who would love to let everybody in this House know what that reality is like. I've had a few constituents come and see me over the years to tell me about what their reality is like, having to live on AISH, how tough it is, and having to make decisions between paying rent or paying electricity bills and buying food at the supermarket. I'd hate to be in that kind of a position. I'd really, really hate to be in that kind of a position, yet this is the reality that so many people are going through.

When we ask the most vulnerable to make the sacrifices, what does that say about us? What does it say about us, the members in this House? Why can't we find other ways? Why aren't we making other priorities and making sure that we can pay off this debt and deficit as we continue moving forward? Why are the most vulnerable people here in the province of Alberta being asked to sacrifice when we see our own Premier taking jets with his friends from a pancake breakfast?

We see employees of the Premier going to London, you know, staying in hotels with champagne baths. I don't even know what that is. I've never even heard of that before in my life. [interjections] These are the kinds of hotels that these guys are staying at, people that are under your watch. People that are under your watch. [interjections] Yeah. Chirp, chirp, chirp, eh? Chirp, chirp, chirp. Yeah, you can't stand it, right? When you're asking the most vulnerable people in Alberta . . .

An Hon. Member: Vitamin C showers.

Member Loyola: Vitamin C showers. There you go. That's what it was.

An Hon. Member: Champagne baths.

Member Loyola: Oh, champagne baths, I wouldn't put it past them. [interjections] Champagne bars? Is that what it was? Champagne bars? There you go. That's what it was, see?

I've never even heard of those things, never even had the experience before. Never had the opportunity to stay in such a luxurious place as that before in my life. That's not the kind of Albertan I am. Obviously, the government has people under its watch going to London, staying at these luxurious hotels, and the

taxpayer is having to pay for it. Yet this government has no problem asking the most vulnerable Albertans to sacrifice so that we can ensure fiscal sustainability as we move forward.

11:00

What I would really like to ask the members from the other side to think about is: why are you asking the most vulnerable to sacrifice? People living on AISH shouldn't be the ones that have to help us make sure to balance this budget moving forward. People that are living paycheque to paycheque shouldn't be the ones that have to bear the brunt of making sure to balance this budget. Children in classrooms shouldn't be the ones that have to bear the brunt of making sure that this budget is balanced. University students shouldn't have to bear the brunt. Right? We need to find other ways in order to make sure that we are fiscally sustainable moving forward. There are other ways to do it. All I'm asking is for the members from the other side of the House to really contemplate what it is that they're asking Albertans to do.

You know, the government has tabled 107 pages of legislation, that cover a vast array of topics. I understand. They're wide ranging and complex. Some of the members on the other side, when they were on this side, criticized this whole omnibus approach. They were, like, "Oh, you can't do that," yet here they are now, in government, doing the exact same thing. Doing the exact same thing. What's most disappointing is that the government is using this omnibus approach and hiding so many of these things, as was well described by the Member for St. Albert, when it comes to the indexing of AISH and, of course, the Henson trust. There are so many other aspects within this omnibus approach where the true intentions are being hidden from Albertans, Madam Chair. It's really important that the members from the UCP get up and speak about this as well.

Of course, these intentions that are being hidden within this omnibus approach are going to be impacting people in your constituencies as well. I'm sure that every constituency across this province has people who live on AISH, has average Albertans that are trying to send their children to university, has children that are in the school system that perhaps now are having to deal with 35 children in a classroom. And then those constituents will be asking each and every one of you: why is it that we have to make the sacrifices when we see your government doing these other things like taking jet planes and having employees that stay at luxurious hotels, with vitamin C baths, showers? Right? It's okay. Don't worry. Don't worry. If you like taking vitamin C showers, it's okay. Don't worry.

The other thing that I haven't had the chance to talk about as well is the deindexing of the seniors' programs, seniors who have given so much to this province over their lifetime. This government said that they were going to make life better for seniors, yet here again in this omnibus legislation we see the intention being hidden. Instead, they're taking money out of the pockets of seniors to pay for this \$4.7 billion, again, corporate no-jobs handout. They're taking benefits from seniors and their dependants, especially those who live on a fixed income, and that's wrong. It's just plain wrong.

There are cuts to lodge funding, the deindexing of benefits, kicking dependants of seniors off their drug plans, the seniors' drug plan. Although these things may seem small, to people who live on a fixed income, just the same as for those who live on AISH, to these seniors, who also live on a fixed income, even a little bit of money goes a long way, and they'll have to decide whether they pay for the drug that they need or whether they're going to be paying for groceries. I just can't understand why the most vulnerable in our society are being asked to make these sacrifices when we're supposed to be here defending their interests.

Again, I'm just going to appeal to the members of the UCP. You all have seniors that live in your ridings. You all have people who live on AISH. You have young families who have their kids going to school, families that are trying to send their children to university. What are you going to say to them when they show up at your door asking why they have to make the sacrifices?

The Chair: Are there any other members wishing to speak? The hon. Member for Calgary-McCall.

Mr. Sabir: Thank you, Madam Chair. I rise to speak to Bill 21, Ensuring Fiscal Sustainability Act, 2019. It's not doing what the title suggests; rather, it takes money away from Albertans from everywhere to pay for the UCP's \$4.7 billion corporate no-jobs handout.

[Mr. Hanson in the chair]

Before I talk about the bill, I do also want to recognize that today is the International Day of Persons with Disabilities. Today we recognize the contributions they make to our communities, to our society, recognize the struggles that they face for their full inclusion, and also recommit ourselves to making sure that they're included in the cultural, economic, political, and social life of our province.

When I think about it, I think there are many things in this piece of legislation that are attacking the services that Albertans with disabilities receive.

When we were government, we made a lot of improvements. For instance, we were able to set up Alberta's first disability advocate to represent their viewpoint and to have their voice at the decision-making tables. We proclaimed October as Disability Employment Awareness Month, recognizing that their participation in our job market, their participation in the economic life of the province is way lower than other Albertans. We didn't just proclaim it; we also put money where our mouth was. We added funding to their employment programs. We created almost 20 internship opportunities within the Ministry of Community and Social Services. We indexed AISH. We increased it. We indexed it so that the benefit level won't erode with the cost of living. This piece of legislation is taking that away.

Mr. Chair, you will remember that during the campaign I said that they will reduce these benefits, that they will cut these benefits, and the Premier himself took to Facebook with a video that it's just over-the-top rhetoric and that we are creating fear and smear. What we are seeing in this piece of legislation is that this government is taking back that \$30 increase that they were supposed to get with CPI. At a time when they can pay for a \$4.7 billion handout, they think it's too onerous for the province to provide them with a \$30 cost of living. For those individuals who are on AISH that are living with disabilities, they are living on a limited income, and on top of that, they have disabilities. They think it's onerous to pay a \$30 cost-of-living increase for them. That piece of legislation is taking that increase away.

11:10

When we were in government, we also improved and increased income exemption for individuals with disabilities. What this legislation is doing is taking those exemptions and putting everything in regulation, that won't be debated in the House. Instead, a minister of cabinet will be able to decide what they think is acceptable for them to set these exemptions at. We also increased AISH child benefits, making it \$200 for the first child and \$100 for every subsequent child. Again, those benefits have now been taken from the act and put into regulation. That leaves it for the

government and for the minister in cabinet to change those benefits without bringing them here or providing all of us with an opportunity to debate about those things.

[Mrs. Pitt in the chair]

We simplified AISH application forms. We also made changes to the Henson trust. For people who have some inheritance or some money, if they want to give it to their loved one, give it to an individual, give it to their children, that money won't be counted in their eligibility for this program. It won't impact their benefits. Again, that was also a piece of legislation that was supported by the then opposition. It was passed unanimously in this House. What they are doing is removing that as well. Alberta was pretty much the only province that didn't exempt Henson trust, but they are bringing us backwards here as well.

When we were in government, there was a scale called the support intensity scale. The entire disability community was of the view that it was humiliating for individuals to go through that scale. They had been asking previous governments to remove that, and they never did. We worked with the community and also removed that support intensity scale. We repealed PDD safety standards that were imposed on them without any consultation by the previous PC government. We created a province-wide phone line to report abuse with respect to individuals with disabilities. We reversed previous government cuts to PUF, program unit funding, for schoolchildren.

There were many things that we worked on. We improved these programs, but certainly there is more work to be done. But instead of making any progress, instead of making improvements, what this piece of legislation is doing is taking us backwards. It's taking away from Albertans with disabilities. It's taking away from cost-of-living increases on their programs. It's repealing, almost, Henson trust, and it's taking all their benefits into the regulation, where they can be changed through order in council. These changes will hurt Albertans with disabilities, and I urge all members of this House to think about these changes. They all were elected to represent their constituents, and every one of us has individuals with disabilities in our constituencies, in our friend circles, in our families. These changes are eroding those benefits for those individuals, and it's not fair to those individuals. It's not something that a fair society will do to its most vulnerable.

Similarly, this piece of legislation is also pausing indexing for seniors' benefits. It's taking seniors off drug plans. It's changing the income for seniors' lodge programs, residual income. Before the budget the Minister of Seniors and Housing was saying that seniors will get whatever they need. Instead, what they are getting is that whatever they had before this is being taken away from them. Clearly, I guess, promise made, promise broken. These changes will make life harder for our seniors. I guess we, again, all have seniors in our homes, in our ridings, in our communities, and they deserve way better than this.

Then some other changes were also made which will make it difficult for municipalities to provide services which they were able to provide before. For instance, some of these changes are enabling the provincial government to retain a greater portion of fines collected on behalf of municipalities. That's what we saw in Calgary, where the Calgary police chief has been saying for a while that their funding has been cut since the province is trying to retain a greater portion of the fines collected, hence that \$13 million shortfall in Calgary police funding. That's coming at a time when our communities have raised safety concerns, in particular communities in the northeast. The Member for Calgary-Falconridge will know that they have raised major concerns about violence in our communities, the rise of crime in our communities,

and now we are seeing changes through this legislation that will enable the province to change this funding and, I guess, put the safety of Albertans at risk.

Also, there are changes in this piece of legislation with respect to postsecondary education. One, the tuition cap, that was in place for four years, has been suspended. I think the Minister of Advanced Education is the only person who was requested by students to raise their fees and who was told by students that they didn't like the tuition freeze, that they wanted their fees to skyrocket. I think that's what they are doing with this and also making the student loan interest rate go up by 1 per cent. They are also cutting credits for parents with another piece of legislation.

This piece of legislation, the changes contained in Bill 21, if passed, will make life more expensive for Albertans across this province. It's part of their budget where they will want Albertans to believe that their \$4.7 billion corporate handout will attract investment, will create jobs, but we haven't seen that. We didn't see investment. We didn't see the jobs. That policy is not paying for itself. Instead, money is taken out of the pockets of Albertans to pay for that failed policy. There is now enough evidence, like we have been saying before they brought forward this policy, that this policy has not worked before. It will not work now. Trickle-down policy doesn't work. Trickle-down is not even in economics. Being a student of economics, I could say that it was just a political scheme. It was never economics by any stretch of that word.

11:20

What we are seeing now, that those who are benefiting from that handout – for instance, my colleague earlier mentioned that Husky has received \$233 million, and they have not created a single job. I think the Minister of Energy will agree with me that instead they have laid off 371 jobs. That's a public number. They are moving investment away to Wisconsin, Saskatchewan, and the States. They have reduced capital funding. How much more evidence does your side need to reconsider this policy? If any of those things that I am saying are not correct, I invite the Minister of Energy to state it for the record if Husky has not done that. Same thing with EnCana. They also got a break from this, but they are moving down to the States.

So we are seeing their policy fail. We are seeing job loss. We are seeing investments moving away from our province. We are seeing companies moving away, and because of that, we are seeing this kind of legislation that's even taking money away from seniors. It's cutting their CPI increases, which in some cases is maybe less than \$10, so they can pay for their failed policy. This piece of legislation is taking seniors off drug plans, almost 45,000 seniors, so that they can pay for their failed \$4.7 billion policy. It's taking money away from housing bodies. It's taking money away from Albertans with disabilities so that they can pay for their failed policies. In short, this piece of legislation is making life difficult for Albertans, and things they are doing with many of the programs are not acceptable to Albertans.

On this International Day of Persons with Disabilities I urge government members to think about Albertans with disabilities and how this piece of legislation will impact them. I know we may hear from them in the rotunda a half-hour from now that they are committed to providing everything to Albertans with disabilities, and at the same time they will come back and vote on this piece of legislation, that is taking benefits away from Albertans with disabilities.

Again, I think I will conclude my remarks by saying that this piece of legislation is just making Albertans pay for this government's failed policies. It's taking money out of the pockets of Albertans, and now Albertans will be paying more to get less.

Not long ago this government, this UCP caucus, wanted Albertans to believe that they were paying 4 to 6 cents on a carbon levy that was killing their livelihood, that was killing their province. Now they have this kind of legislation where their taxes are going up, where their services are cut, where their school funding is cut, where money is taken out of their hospitals, where money is taken away from Albertans with disabilities, where money is taken away from seniors. Like, everybody is paying more just for their failed ideological policies, that have not created a single job.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Are there any other members wishing to speak? The hon. Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake-St. Paul.

Mr. Hanson: Thank you very much, Madam Chair and through you to the Member for Calgary-McCall. At the beginning of his close to 20 minutes there he mentioned some tweets that he had put out prior to and during the campaign last spring. I was hoping that he would take that opportunity, because he never has, to apologize to myself and my staff in St. Paul and to an individual that as a result of his irresponsible tweet when he was the Minister of Community and Social Services, where he claimed that the UCP was going to cancel AISH, within hours of that – and I have the e-mail from the perpetrator that apologized and directly correlated his actions to the tweet from the minister. He came out just before midnight and threw two rocks through the window of my constituency office because of an irresponsible tweet from a minister of the province of Alberta.

This is Committee of the Whole, and that member has the opportunity to speak at length as many times as he wants, so maybe if he's going to mention those kinds of tweets that he was talking about, perhaps he'll take advantage of this opportunity to stand up and apologize. He never has. He hasn't apologized to the individual. He has not apologized to my staff for putting them through the stress that he did. An absolutely irresponsible tweet, an untrue tweet, and it continues. We've seen it over the last couple of months, time after time after time, the fearmongering from that side that's causing people unnecessary distress, Madam Chair.

An Hon. Member: You want to talk about stress?

Ms Hoffman: Speak to why you're cutting AISH.

Mr. Sabir: You're cutting AISH.

Mr. Hanson: Yeah. See, they don't like it when you strike a nerve, do they, Madam Chair?

Irresponsible public messaging that causes people unnecessary strife to the point where individuals that are on the edge are pushed to the point – the man in question had never had a criminal record in his life, and now he had charges laid against him. He was very apologetic, but the charges were laid because he'd made an attack on an office and thrown rocks through a window within hours of a tweet by that member when he was a minister. It's embarrassing. He should apologize, and I wish that he would stand up and take this opportunity to apologize. He never has, and I think it's shameful.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Are there any other members wishing to speak? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. Schmidt: Thank you, Madam Chair. It's a pleasure to rise and speak to Bill 21 this morning. Although I am tempted to respond to some of the comments made by the Member for Bonnyville-Cold

Lake-St. Paul, you know, for the sake of maintaining decorum, I won't.

I do want to address the issue of doctor practitioner IDs here, that is present in Bill 21. It was interesting that yesterday, of course, many of us here in the House were meeting with medical students, from both the University of Calgary and the University of Alberta, to hear about their concerns around doctor practitioner ID restrictions. I think it's fair to say that the med students from both the U of A and the U of C are opposed to this idea of restricting doctor practitioner IDs, and they were here to meet with us to tell us that in person. It's a shame, Madam Chair, that a number of colleagues from the opposite side were unable or unwilling to meet with the medical students, from what I understand. But, you know, in my discussions with the medical students, of course, I informed them that that was instructive of who the UCP is really working for. If they're not willing to meet with medical students to talk about this significant issue, it's quite clear that they are not interested in the well-being of medical students and future medical practitioners here in the province.

11:30

One of the questions that the medical students asked me was: why is this government going ahead with this idea of restricting doctor practitioner IDs when the evidence is clear that it doesn't work to improve access to health care in rural areas and that it's also been found to be unconstitutional? The answer that I gave them was that this is a government that doesn't actually pay attention to or care about the evidence, nor does it care about losing in court. This is a government that is concerned, really, with only two things, Madam Chair: it's concerned about consolidating its own power, and it's concerned with Americanizing our public health care system. That's what we see here with this move to restrict doctor practitioner IDs for soon-to-graduate students from the University of Alberta and the University of Calgary.

We know that access to rural health care is not, even though that's the stated concern of the members opposite, actually what they're concerned about. We can tell by their actions that they're not concerned about access to rural health care. The medical students that I had the privilege of speaking to yesterday had done internships in rural locations around Alberta and found the experience to be frustrating and demotivating because at the time there were not adequate supports, in their view, for the practice of medicine in those areas. They had limited access to nurses and other health care professionals that they require to be able to provide quality health care to their patients. They didn't have access to the technologies that urban health care professionals have.

The situation has only gotten worse under this regime. We found out last Friday that the government is intent on laying off almost 8,000 public-sector workers, most of whom are going to be in the health care profession. We don't yet know where those positions are going to be eliminated, but with numbers that big, Madam Chair, it's hard to imagine that rural health care won't be on the chopping block.

If the members opposite are genuine in their concern for providing access to rural health care, they wouldn't be moving to cut the number of people who are working in health care in rural areas like they are. That was quite clear to the medical students as well. They understood quite clearly that this government is insincere when it's saying that it's concerned about access to rural health care for the people of Alberta.

They also understood that by restricting practice IDs, it was the thin edge of the wedge to opening up more American-style health care in Alberta. There's nothing limiting a graduate of medical school from hanging up their shingle and operating in private practice. They don't

need a practice ID. They can take whoever can afford to pay the bills in to see them. It was quite clear to the medical students, as it is to us here in our caucus, that this move to restrict practice IDs is not about access to rural health care at all. It's about opening the door to American-style health care, where the people who have benefited from the \$4.7 billion corporate handout that this government has given will be able to access the finest doctors and the best health care that money can provide. The rest of us are going to be left struggling to get the health care that we need in a system that's being intentionally driven into the ground.

You know, the med students had some helpful suggestions for the government if they are genuine in their concern for increasing access to rural health care for Albertans. One of the things that they indicated was that not only would it be wise to continue to invest in health care professionals, staffing levels, infrastructure, and technologies in rural health care in Alberta but that it would also be wise to increase the number of medical students who are accepted into medical school programs here in Alberta from rural schools.

There are a number of things that need to be done in order to increase rural student access to medical school programs that this government is doing the exact opposite of. You know, rural students, as I've said in debate about this bill before, not only need to be able to afford to pay the tuition to the university that they want to go to, but they also have to be able to afford to find accommodations and be able to afford to feed themselves when they're going to school far away from home.

When this government cuts grants to universities at the scale at which they have and when this government forces universities to raise tuition by 23 per cent over the next four years – when the government cuts grants, that encourages layoffs. We've seen massive layoffs already at the University of Calgary, and there are hundreds and hundreds more to come across the system. We've already seen that the University of Alberta is approving fee hikes for residences and meal plans. That barrier to anybody who wants to go to university is getting ever higher, and the barrier to somebody who has to move away from home, which includes rural Albertans, is getting even higher still.

We're cutting the ability of the University of Alberta and the University of Calgary to deliver a quality program to the most students that they can afford to, and we're also making it harder and harder for rural students who would like to become medical students to even be able to afford to attend school in the first place. How on earth, given that set of circumstances, are we going to realize the potential of bright, ambitious young people living in rural Alberta to attend medical school with barriers that are so high? I would suggest, Madam Speaker, that we won't.

The problem is already severe. Of the medical students that we met with yesterday, I asked if any of them were from rural locations, and none of them were, Madam Speaker. We know that students who have grown up in rural Alberta are more likely to go back and practise in their hometowns or in similar settings once they've completed their studies than kids who have grown up in urban areas because they're familiar with it. They like life in rural Alberta, they want to be close to their friends and family, and they want to contribute back to the communities that have given them so much support. Again, I say that if the government were genuine in its concern about increasing access to rural medical care, it would do the things it needs to do to incent rural students to be able to attend medical school in this province. In fact, the government is doing exactly the opposite.

11:40

There is much more that I could say about the way this government is treating doctors in general. All I can say is that when

I had the opportunity to speak to the medical students, I reminded them of the power that medical students and their colleagues who are already practising medicine have to push back against this government's agenda, because doctors have the trust and respect of everybody in Alberta, certainly much more than any of us sitting here in this Chamber. The people of Alberta will believe them when they say that our health care system is under attack, that this government is doing everything it can to Americanize the health care system and make sure that only the wealthy benefit from this system. If they use their power wisely, they can successfully push back against this government's reckless agenda to Americanize our health care system.

I fully expect that medical students and their colleagues practising medicine already will use that power to their full extent to make this government walk back its American health care agenda. I assured the medical students and I will continue to assure every health care professional that I meet that we are with them in this fight and that we won't stop until this agenda to Americanize our health care system is entirely scrapped.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Whitemud.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you, Madam Chair. I am pleased to rise today to speak again in Committee of the Whole with respect to Bill 21 as proposed by the government. I will speak once again to my deep concern with respect to a number of the provisions within this act, but I want to highlight a couple in particular. We've had a lot of the members stand up here today and speak about their advocacy, the concerns that they hear from their constituents. In fact, in all debate in this House we hear members from both sides of the House stand up and speak on behalf of their constituents, which is our most core and fundamental responsibility as representatives for each of the ridings within this Legislature.

I want to share the story of a constituent that I met with just this past Friday, when I was in my constituency office, because it was extremely compelling and moving. The constituent who came into my office is the mother of a severely autistic 18-year-old son, whom she obviously cares very deeply for. In fact, the entire time that we were meeting, she had her phone out, and she apologized, to begin with, by saying, "I apologize for keeping my phone out, but my son is currently with his aide, and in case he needs assistance, I need to always have my phone at the ready." Of course, I said: "That's no problem at all. Of course I completely understand that." What was particularly moving about our meeting and our discussion was that as the mother of a child, now a young adult, with severe disabilities, she of course has spent the full past 18 years as a parent advocating for and caring for her child and planning and probably shaping and creating new plans for how she would care for her child going forward.

Many of us in this Assembly are parents. You know, we raise our kids, and we anticipate the day when they will be independent and be able to live on their own, and we hope for and we invest in that future for them. But for parents of children with severe disabilities, they're planning a different future. They're thinking not just about caring for their child in the immediate and making sure that any barriers to opportunities that they may have are limited but about making sure that they have a fantastic quality of life, all the hopes and aspirations that we all have for our children. But they also have to plan for the fact that their children may never be able to be independent and may never be able to live without the care of medical assistance and therapists and, importantly, a parent.

Of course, the reality is that at some point these severely disabled children will grow up to be adults, and at some point their parents

will likely pass on. These parents have an additional burden, which is to think about and plan for a future where they're no longer around to step up and advocate for their children and to think about it in a way that I don't think most parents can even conceive of when they first discover they're going to be having a child. You don't think about that. You don't think about: well, what happens when I'm no longer around? That is a very harsh reality for these families, to be thinking about who's going to care for their adult children when they're no longer there.

That is why Henson trusts were so important and continue to be so important. Those trusts were a way for families to put away money to ensure that when they're no longer around, their adult children are still taken care of. It is a common-sense approach to exempt those trust funds because this is planning for the future. This is planning for a time when there is no family member or parent who's available to provide that support. It is planning for the future, and it is common sense to exempt those funds from the eligibility requirements for young people when they're seeking application to AISH or any other supports because this isn't money that is there because they have wealth or they have a storage of money for disposable income. This money is for planning for a future when there is nobody in their family who is still able to care for them. This is something that we as a system should respect and should support because it is key to families doing the planning for the future so that their children are taken care of but also to plan for a future to lessen the dependency or the need for additional government support and to ensure a standard and basic quality of living for their child, which all of us as parents and Albertans understand is a priority. These families should be commended for being able to do this planning.

I'm proud that this is something that the former government respected and understood, that Henson trusts were something that we needed to put in legislation to protect so that those families knew that their child was not going to be penalized as a result of these funds when seeking basic supports under AISH. It has been said a number of times – I've said it; my colleagues have said it – and we will continue to say that AISH funding is such a bare minimum amount, such a small amount to live on for these individuals that any cut, any reduction in that amount has a significant effect on those individuals. These are the individuals who are severely disabled, who have significant limitations on their ability to work and to earn their own income. It is not a lot of money. As my colleague the Member for St. Albert said, most of us would never have to imagine living on such a small amount of money, but for many Albertans that is the reality.

To be able to plan ahead, for these families to be able to do that and to invest for their children is so important. That is why it is such a disgrace, I believe, for the Henson trust and for money that's put away by these families to be removed from protection under Bill 21 for eligibility requirements for AISH.

What I find most disarming when we've had these conversations in the House is that these omnibus bills were brought forward by the government with a significant amount of details that affected multitudes of pieces of legislation, so many different things are snuck in here. This is only one of many omnibus bills that this government has brought forward in this session, and the idea is that they're hoping these things will get snuck by Albertans, perhaps snuck by the opposition but definitely snuck by Albertans, and that we're not going to catch on.

What I find most disarming is that this was snuck in, yet we've seen that the Minister of Community and Social Services stood up and denied it was the case, which led me to believe that perhaps the minister has not even read this bill. Either she was not aware that this change was brought forward or she truly believes, as this

government does, that when you cut the amount of money that people are making and the amount of money they're eligible for, it's not a cut. That is such a bizarre world of cognitive dissonance that we're living in, where we're standing here talking, presenting, and discussing the bills that are brought forward by this government and saying right here that this individual on AISH is now going to get less and that that is a cut, and the government member stands up and says, "That's not a cut," as if repeating it over and over makes it true. We're actually speaking to the provisions of their bill, yet they continue to not actually answer the question and address the issue of why they have cut supports for those most vulnerable Albertans who are on AISH.

We brought it forward in this House and the Member for St. Albert raised it in question period and it has also been brought forward in an amendment to this bill. We've said: look, in this act, Bill 21, you have removed the protections for trust money from the eligibility requirements for Henson trusts. And the Minister of Community and Social Services stood up and said: no, that's not true. But it is right here; on page 17 of Bill 21 it clearly states that "section 3.3 is repealed." Section 3.3 sets out the eligibility requirements for somebody who's seeking AISH. I'm going to quote part of it but not all of it. Section 3.3 specifically states:

The value of all assets of a person and the person's cohabiting partner must not include

- (a) the value of any assets that are held in a trust in which the person or the person's cohabiting partner has a beneficial interest.

That is the provision that states that trust monies must not be included in the eligibility assessment for somebody applying for AISH.

11:50

It explicitly says in Bill 21 that that section is repealed, so when we stand up and say, "You are repealing the protections for Henson trusts," and the minister and government members stand up and say, "No, we're not," it makes me wonder if they have a version of Bill 21 that we don't have, that Albertans don't have. You know what? Honestly, I wouldn't be surprised. I wouldn't be surprised if that's the case, because I think that perhaps either the members get talking points that speak to legislation that's different from the one that's tabled in the House or perhaps at this point I would believe anything from this government with respect to what they're trying to sneak by Albertans.

Mr. Schow: Point of order.

The Chair: Hon. member, a point of order has been called.

The hon. Member for Cardston-Siksika.

Point of Order Imputing Motives

Mr. Schow: Thank you, Madam Chair. I rise on a point of order under Standing Order 23(h), (i), and (j). I see the members opposite shaking their heads saying that this is not a point of order. I do believe that, in fact, it is. It is imputing a false motive to this government of trying to sneak things past Albertans.

I recognize that you don't have the benefit of the Blues, Madam Chair, but we need to be very cautious of the things we say in this Chamber.

Ms Pancholi: Oh, yeah. Yeah. Great.

Mr. Schow: That goes, of course, for the member there as well as she's trying to taunt while I'm making a point of order. I just don't quite understand where she sees that going and, really, where she

gets the gall to have that lack of decorum in this Chamber. I'd ask her to apologize and retract that comment. This government is not trying to sneak anything past Albertans. Rather, we're trying to make life better for all Albertans.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview.

Mr. Bilous: Thank you very much, Madam Chair. This is not a point of order. The comment made is a difference of opinion. On this side of the House we believe that some of the legislation are things that the government may be trying to put past Albertans. This was not a comment directed at an individual member, and therefore it does not fall under 23(h), (i), and (j). It is not a point of order; it's a difference of opinion.

The Chair: Hon. members, as we near this Christmas break, when we will be reintroduced to our constituents, I would suggest that we focus on that and not language that may inflame others.

This is not a point of order, but I will express some caution to the hon. member as she proceeds with the rest of her time.

Debate Continued

Ms Pancholi: Thank you, Madam Chair. As I was saying, I believe that it's important that the government is forthcoming and honest with Albertans about what's contained in their bills.

In section 3.3, which is repealed, is the protection for Henson trusts. When the Minister of Community and Social Services says that this is not being repealed, that is actually contrary to what is in Bill 21. I'm here to speak on behalf of my constituent, who is representative of a number of constituents and is probably representative of constituents from across this province and across the Assembly, who was in tears in my office because she believed that she had been doing what was right and best for her child for the past 18 years by putting away money in trust and believed that it was the only assurances that she had going forward that her adult child would be cared for and would not be penalized when seeking supports from this government, from AISH. She was counting on that. It gave her peace of mind to know that her child would be cared for to some degree in her absence.

For the Minister of Community and Social Services to stand up and say that that is not happening when Bill 21 clearly repeals that – I invite the Minister of Community and Social Services to then make it clear and to propose her own amendment to Bill 21 to correct that. Actually, the Member for St. Albert did that. She proposed a clear amendment to Bill 21 to clarify, apparently in accordance with what the Minister of Community and Social Services is saying, that Henson trusts are protected. That was an amendment that was brought forward by the Member for St. Albert. The government members voted against it, and it was voted down.

I simply have to ask on behalf of my constituent: if there is a clear commitment from this government to protect Henson trusts, to protect severely disabled Albertans, to protect their families, who are seeking to protect them going forward, then bring forward your own amendment to correct the mistake, I assume, that was made in this bill because as of right now this bill repeals those protections.

The Chair: Hon. member, I hesitate to interrupt, but according to Standing Order 4(3), we will now rise and report progress.

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake-St. Paul.

Mr. Hanson: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. The Committee of the Whole has had under consideration certain bills. The committee reports progress on the following bill: Bill 21.

The Deputy Speaker: Does the Assembly concur in the report? All those in favour, please say aye.

Hon. Members: Aye.

The Deputy Speaker: Any opposed, say no. So carried.
The hon. Minister of Energy.

Mrs. Savage: Well, thank you. I move to adjourn the Assembly until this afternoon at 1:30.

[Motion carried; the Assembly adjourned at 11:56 a.m.]

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