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The 30th Legislature
First Session

Alberta Hansard

Wednesday morning, December 4, 2019

Day 52

The Honourable Nathan M. Cooper, Speaker

Legislative Assembly of Alberta
The 30th Legislature
First Session

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Legislative Assembly of Alberta

9 a.m. **Wednesday, December 4, 2019**

[The Speaker in the chair]

Prayers

The Speaker: Hon. members, the prayer. Lord, the God of righteousness and truth, grant to our Queen and to her government, to all Members of the Legislative Assembly, and 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. Amen.

Hon. members, please be seated. We are at Ordres du jour.

Orders of the Day

Government Bills and Orders
Third Reading

Bill 26
Farm Freedom and Safety Act, 2019

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Agriculture and Forestry. Take 2.

Mr. Dreeshen: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It is a bit of déjà vu as I'm happy to rise in this House to move third reading of Bill 26, the Farm Freedom and Safety Act, 2019, as I did yesterday.

I thought it was great, Mr. Speaker, that there were more members in the House that got to debate this bill yesterday. There were some amendments, there was thoughtful debate on both sides of the House, but it's great to see that our rural caucus really had a lot of involvement in the developing and drafting of this bill.

As I've said numerous times, Mr. Speaker, there were 25 consultations that happened across the province this summer, and it was great to see, you know, farmers and farm workers from every type and size of farm and commodity of farm. They all came together, and there were four major common themes that I think are throughout Bill 26. Those themes are changes to employment standards, labour relations, OH and S, and insurance. If I can just go a little bit into each one of those here and, again, into the rationale of why there was such a consensus in the farming community behind each one.

When it comes to employment standards, Mr. Speaker, that was probably one of the fastest conversations that happened, where every different farmer and farm worker just has that understanding, the realization that farming is unique, that there are peak times of the year in which you have to do whatever it takes to get it done. You're not just fighting against the clock. You're fighting against Mother Nature and conditions that are outside of your control. The old saying that you make hay when the sun shines pretty much encapsulates perfectly why there have to be exemptions from employment standards for farms here in Alberta, as there are in other jurisdictions, in other provinces across Canada. Again, it's just that understanding of the reality of farming.

There were members opposite that talked about their times helping out in calving or harvest season and during harvests. I mean, it was nice to see that there was at least an understanding that, again, farming is unique.

When it came to labour relations, Mr. Speaker, something that we heard from the farming community is that there has been no certification of unions. Again, there was a concern that because of the sensitivity of the type of work in agriculture, you could have negative effects on farms if there was a strike. Something that farmers would say is that there's no need for unions on farms because, again, there are such amazing relationships between farmers and farm workers. They're sitting there at the dinner tables with farmers and farm workers together, and that close camaraderie between farm workers and farmers is just a reality of what happens out in Alberta.

The Occupational Health and Safety Act, that overarching piece of legislation, is going to be there, but it won't be prescriptive by the specific OH and S code. Again, that was something that farmers said was ridiculous, that the previous government, with Bill 6, tried to have specific OH and S codes that each individual farm would have to try to adhere to, which, again, was impractical and something that was never developed. Someone said that, you know, if you could just legislate common sense, I think you'd find the right balance, and I think this overarching OH and S Act will achieve that.

Finally, Mr. Speaker, the biggest part of the consultations that we had, that took up the most amount of time, was on insurance. This bill will have choice in insurance of WCB or private insurance. It's something that I thank the minister of labour for, his work specifically on this as well, talking to insurance industries to say: "Look at a crossjurisdictional scan again of what's offered in the United States and in other provinces and in other countries. How can we actually get a comparator to WCB? It doesn't have to be the same, it doesn't have to be an apple-to-apple comparison of WCB worker insurance as a private insurance option, but what are the benefits of private worker insurance, and what are the benefits of WCB?" I think that this choice ultimately gives that flexibility to farmers and farm workers, whether it be copay, whether it be certain levels of coverage, whether it's on a work site or off a work site. That flexibility is going to be there for farmers and farm workers, and I think that that insurance piece is something that, again, has been very appreciated by the ag community.

I know, Mr. Speaker, that there have been lots of articles on this already, kind of an initial response from the ag community. I'd just like to read a couple of quotes from an article – I think it was from yesterday – in the *Alberta Farmer Express*, Alberta's New Farm Safety Act Gets Warm Response. This was from John Guelly, the Alberta Canola chair:

> It's making farming easier . . . Everybody was scared to go across the road . . .
>
> We can [now] think about expanding again without a whole bunch of hoops.

That is, again, farmers on the ground saying that the changes to Bill 6, to now have this Bill 26, are actually making farming easier. But also there is a willingness to expand. There's optimism in the agriculture community such that farmers are now willing to expand their operations and to invest more back into their farms.

Also in this article Kevin Bender, a regional rep for Alberta Wheat, said:

> It will lower stress levels and give more freedom . . .
>
> For our sake, we didn't want to hire people because we had all this red tape to deal with.

Again, it's just an understanding that what we're trying to achieve here is to unlock the economic potential of our agriculture sector, and I think we've come to a really good balance.

In third reading now I would like to thank all the members of this House for their time and their study and everything that they've contributed to this debate and the drafting of this bill and the

consultations. I think about half of our government caucus were actually at these consultations over the summer, and I'm just very grateful for all of the team effort that went into the drafting of Bill 26. I'm happy to see how the vote turns out, Mr. Speaker.

Thank you very much.

Statement by the Speaker

Speakers List Following Bill Recommittal to Committee of the Whole

The Speaker: Hon. members, by way of providing context with respect to third reading, as this is the first time in the 30th Legislative Assembly that a recommittal motion has taken place and third reading has been moved again, the speakers list has been reset. It is as though the previous third reading has not yet taken place, so any member of the Assembly is able to speak to third reading regardless of whether or not they had spoken previously to third reading, just by way of context for you.

The other comment that I have for the hon. minister is that he quoted at some length from an article. It would be reasonable and expected of him to table it in the Assembly later today.

I saw the hon. Member for Edmonton-McClung would like to provide comment.

Mr. Dach: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. While I rise today, I regret to inform the House that I don't share the minister's enthusiasm for passage of this piece of legislation.

Bill 26 is a backwards step in many ways, and I know that the minister is proud to bring forward this legislation, seeing that he's ticked off a lot of boxes, as far as he believes the farming community is concerned, with respect to eliminating what we had brought forward when we were in government, our Bill 6. Of course, this not only repeals Bill 6, Mr. Speaker; it goes a long way beyond that. It implements some very damaging and awkward elements in this legislation.

9:10

I know the minister just mentioned a moment ago that he felt that the new Bill 26 eliminated a lot of red tape. Well, Mr. Speaker, what he refers to as red tape are actually international labour standards and standards of law that are enshrined not only in national constitutions such as our own but also in the universal declaration of human rights. For example, the legislative norms that you find in most western democracies are that the right to organize is enshrined and respected in legislation and in constitutions. Yet this piece of legislation removes that right for farm workers and small farms, those with five or under employees.

While indeed the family farm in the agricultural sector, where producers are growing crops and raising animals, is certainly a very unique place in the category of workplaces, it is still a workplace, Mr. Speaker, and, as such, workers who are on those farms deserve the same protection as anybody else with respect to the right to organize. While the minister is correct in saying that that right has not been exercised often, his estimation that it's not therefore necessary because there's such a collegial and respectful relationship between farm workers and their employers on these small farms – that's no argument and no justification for removing such a basic fundamental right, to organize, if indeed farm workers feel the need to come together.

As I've mentioned before in this House, we are at the 100-year anniversary of the Winnipeg General Strike of 1919, where Canadians lost their lives trying to establish the right to organize in Winnipeg after the return of soldiers from the First World War. This celebration of the 100-year anniversary of that is certainly an interesting background to what we see happening in Alberta right now, where the Minister of Agriculture and Forestry is happily removing the right to organize from a class of workers, from farm workers on small farms, and suggesting that it's simply something that isn't necessary, that they're not using it and therefore they won't miss it.

Well, it begs the question, Mr. Speaker: who's next? And what's next? What category, what class of workers will this government go after next when they decide that perhaps a piece of labour legislation shouldn't apply in a particular category? Just simply saying that there's no need for this legislation because it hasn't been exercised and because there's a special relationship on the farm between farm workers and their bosses, their employers, isn't a justification for taking such a drastic step to actually remove the right to organize in a workplace. I think it's something that people across the country and, in fact, internationally will look at, shake their heads, and wonder: in a western democracy what level of labour rights will we sink below if indeed the government continues on this path to eliminating the long-standing norms of fundamental rights in labour legislation?

We fail to recognize as often or as well as we should, Mr. Speaker, in this Legislature the fundamental necessity of having a healthy labour movement and healthy labour legislation which allows and respects the right of workers to organize and form a union and represent themselves in negotiations. That pillar, as we look at pillars in this Legislature holding this building up, these columns – one of those fundamental columns happens to be that right to organize, the right to associate, the right to form a union and to represent oneself in labour negotiations as an organized labour force. Without that, if indeed we keep chipping away at it, as this government seems intent to do, we end up with less of a real democracy. That is more than shameful. It's something that Albertans should recognize and raise their voices against, as organized labour certainly is doing right now.

I know that people in this province who are working people, who were perhaps involved already in the labour movement and maybe even with organized labour, are appalled at what's happening, particularly with this measure. According to the AFL president, Gil McGowan, speaking about the UCP farm workers bill:

> Bill 26 is a giant step backwards for farm, ranch and agriculture workers . . . back to no longer having the basic workplace rights enjoyed by their counterparts in every other Canadian province. In fact, this bill goes beyond repealing the workplace protections put in place under the previous government. It takes Alberta even further backwards by adding more exempted workers in new industries such as greenhouses and mushroom farms, which were previously covered by workplace legislation even before Bill 6.

Mr. Speaker, I will table the statement from Mr. McGowan that I'm quoting from now later on in the House.

He goes on to say that the minister responsible for this bill "should be singled out for particular criticism." I agree with that. It's not something that one should be enthusiastically cheering about, as Mr. McGowan says, "stripping rights and protections from some of our most vulnerable and long-suffering fellow citizens," farm workers, protections that internationally are respected under covenants such as the universal declaration of human rights as well as the Constitution of this country.

Mr. Speaker, of course, it's very evident that this minister is no friend of ordinary working Albertans. He's really got his sights set on attacking organized labour, and this is one small way that they can put a stick in the spokes of the ability of organized labour to continue their internationally respected rights to actually organize and form a union. I think it's a bit of a trial balloon, and we'll see how far they intend to take it. There will be other elements in other pieces of legislation where this government will try to test the will

of Albertans again to allow them to diminish the rights of workers to exercise their long-standing rights to organize, and we will be ever vigilant on that front.

Now, I'll go on to say also that beyond reversing hundreds of years of basic labour and human rights by removing core protections for workers – we know that the majority of farmers, of course, care for their workers and pay more than the law allows, but not everyone. Something that I have yet to hear a good explanation for from this minister or this government, Mr. Speaker, is why it's okay for some workers to be paid as little as $2 or $3 an hour or perhaps nothing at all because the minimum wage requirement is gone from this legislation. If indeed it's gone for paid farm workers, the right to expect to actually be paid, if that's completely exempted, what is next? What piece of legislation will this type of draconian measure be inserted into next?

Once again, we have the explanation from the minister and members of the government saying: "Well, gosh. You know, farmers have a great relationship with their employees. They will work out the payment arrangements. There's no need for minimum wage requirements. That's just onerous red tape." Well, I'll tell you what. These are fundamental rights that are established internationally. On our globe, anywhere on the planet, workers should have the right enshrined in law that they will be paid for their work. As our Leader of the Official Opposition yesterday noted, it may be something that can be negotiated, the actual minimum wage that somebody is paid, but the actual right to earn a minimum wage is fundamentally nonnegotiable. Yet this government seems to think not and has implemented in part of this legislation a measure to eliminate the need to actually have a basic minimum wage. So it goes on. It's fundamentally a gleeful attack upon workers and their rights.

9:20

In Bill 6, that we had brought in, it originally exempted family members from the applications of employment standards, and that's well expanded on in Bill 26. The expanded clause on pages 5 and 6 of the bill adds:

> (b) employees who are employed in a farming or ranching operation referred to in subsection (4), or to their employer while acting in the capacity of employer of those employees, if the operation employs 5 or fewer employees.

So, indeed, what we'd end up having is an exemption of a class of workers, unlike any jurisdiction in North America, from earning at least some type of basic minimum wage for their work. It's more than undoing Bill 6, Mr. Speaker. It's taking Alberta into pre Industrial Revolution labour law territory.

We'll continue to monitor the situation as the government moves forward with legislation in other areas. However, I think Albertans are rightly forewarned that the attack will continue and that labour legislation will be something this government will continue to chip away at so that the rights of workers that are enshrined in international law are diminished under their watch.

We understand, of course, that this was a key campaign promise of the UCP, but it goes way too far, Mr. Speaker. Our farm and ranch workers deserve to be protected by modern workplace health and safety rules. It's important to get occupational health and safety right because, of course, lives are at stake.

Here again the government is picking the pockets of workers for their overtime as well. So not only will these hard-working workers now have to deal with the fallout; the government has increased their cost of living to pay for its $4.7 billion no-jobs corporate giveaway.

Now, if the government is truly sincere, Mr. Speaker, about supporting farmers, it should take action about the many farmers that are impacted by poor harvests and are struggling. They told the government that they need action and that the current framework does not work for them, but they're not getting anything.

The government estimates that about three-quarters of Alberta's farms will be classified as small operations. So three-quarters of Alberta's farms will now become workplaces with no protection for workers as far as their right to organize.

When it comes to the choice amongst insurance options, WCB versus private insurance to cover paid workers on the farms, the repeal of Bill 6 once again shows that the government has a poor lack of judgment in making the decision to get rid of the requirement to have WCB. For example, in 2016 there were 777 WCB claims in the agriculture industry, 794 in 2017, 886 in 2018, and 572 in the first eight months of 2019, therefore showing that indeed the WCB was a viable product, a worthwhile insurance option, and one that farm workers were exercising their right to use. It was working. Yet this government sees fit to once again mute the needs of paid farm workers by directing that secondary option, private insurance to be offered alongside of WCB. It's something that paid farm workers will be lessened in their benefits from.

The paid farm workers who indeed are injured on farms can now sue their employers, which is different from what would have happened under our Bill 6, where WCB was in place. It protected the employer, actually, from further litigation in the event of a WCB claim being made. This is something that I think the minister has failed to really emphasize in his proud plunge to make WCB an option and in his desire to promote the option for private insurance.

I'm not sure how many lawsuits a small farmer could sustain if indeed an injured worker, an injured employee from that person's farm decided that the compensation from a private insurance claim was insufficient to compensate him or his family for the damages suffered by an injury or death on the farm, but this type of civil litigation for injuries can run into the hundreds of thousands of dollars. I would venture to say, Mr. Speaker, that one lawsuit from an injured worker on a farm could potentially sink a family farm. That's the type of exposure that this minister has opened up with the option to continue with private insurance versus the WCB. We will certainly be monitoring that and finding out over time how many farms actually go bankrupt and have to foreclose because they suffer a lawsuit against them which they don't have the means to pay.

Overall, Mr. Speaker, the right to exercise the option to organize as farm workers; the occupational health and safety standards, which will not necessarily be enforced on these small farms, the fact that you won't have the database to determine best practices because of OH and S being not as widely implemented under this legislation; the labour relations situation where you don't have a basic minimum wage necessity enshrined in legislation, where there's no need for an employer to respect the right of the workers on family farms to organize; the option to opt for private insurance and therefore loss of the OH and S data and the exposure that a family farm operator will suffer as a result of insurance claims and lawsuits that will result: this certainly isn't something that I think all Alberta workers look forward to.

For those in the workplace throughout the province who are witnessing what's going on right now with the family farm and the government's attack on labour legislation therein under the guise of red tape when in fact what they're looking at doing is chipping away at international labour standards under the code word "flexibility," which is code for opting out of universally recognized legislated labour law norms, these are all major steps backwards, Mr. Speaker, for this province to take in terms of labour legislation.

I think that internationally we'll see that we have a pretty big black eye as a result of this. People who regarded Canada as a place where workers' rights were fundamentally protected and enshrined are

wondering how far backwards we're going to go and how far backwards – other countries who think that they will also want to perhaps chip away at workers' rights will now feel that they have the pathway to go. I really need to say that this legislation is a disaster.

The Speaker: Hon. members, we are on third reading of Bill 26, the Farm Freedom and Safety Act, 2019. I see the hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Devon has risen.

Mr. Smith: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It gives me great pleasure to be able to rise today and to speak in favour of Bill 26, the Farm Freedom and Safety Act, 2019. I want to start by saying thank you. I want to say thank you to the hon. minister that has brought forward this bill. It is true that we had 25 consultation sessions across this province, and it was a pleasure to have the minister in my constituency to meet with the good citizens of Drayton Valley-Devon. I can tell you that they were grateful. They were very grateful to this minister for taking the time to come, for asking, for listening, for committing to reflect their concerns on this bill. They had grave concerns with Bill 6, that was passed by the previous government. I had farmers in my constituency literally in tears of frustration over Bill 6. So to have a minister that would visit our constituency, that would listen to the concerns of the farmers in my constituency, and that would enact this piece of legislation – they're very grateful, and on behalf of my constituents I want to say thank you for this bill.

9:30

This bill addresses in a very common-sense way the concerns that my constituents brought up. You know, they kept telling me, as we went through the original Bill 6 debate, that farming is different, that farming is not like most other businesses in this province. We even call it the family farm, because one of the realities of farming in Alberta is that many of these farms are run by families. They live on them; they work on them. Everything about their life is surrounding this farm. It's a family farm. To apply the labour code and all of the rules and regulations that were under Bill 6 to the family farm just made no sense, in their minds, so it's good to see that in this bill we've recognized that.

Small farms, with under five employees who work less than six months consecutively, will be exempt from all employment standards and workplace insurance. It recognizes the reality that small farms will often hire on a very casual basis. It might be for calving season. It might be over harvest. You know, this kind of work just doesn't apply to the employment standards and the issues for workplace insurance, et cetera. Farms that are larger, that have a significant number of wage workers: they're required to follow occupational health and safety. They're required to have workplace insurance and to meet employment standards. This makes sense.

There is so much common sense in this bill. I know that my farmers in my constituency are appreciative of the common sense that you've brought into their work environment.

We now have the capacity for farm workers to be able to purchase their own disability and life insurance, and often that means that they can be covered for hours after they're working, so off the clock. This allows them to have the choice of whether they'll be covered by WCB or by some form of private insurance. We do expect our farms in this province, our great farms in this province, to follow and to maintain basic safety standards while being exempt from the application of the OH and S regulations and codes. Anybody that has been in a farm environment understands just how difficult it would be to apply those standards that might be fine on a factory floor to a family farm.

Now, the hon. Member for Edmonton-McClung spent a great deal of time, prior to me, talking about Bill 26 and spent a lot of time talking about a very typical view from the other side of the House, that sees the world almost exclusively in a class structure. Now, let me start by saying that I believe that every Member of this Legislative Assembly supports the idea of having a healthy labour movement. It's part of the modern civil society that we live in. Everyone in this House, I believe, will and does support the concept of labour rights and the ability to organize. But I think we have to be very careful. Not everything in life falls into that rigid structure of class warfare. Not everything in life can be governed by and overseen by a labour movement mentality. I think that we heard clearly in this province that as far as farmers and ranchers and farm families in this province, they don't fit into that rigid world view.

I think we have to be very careful when we stand up in this House and we laud the 100th anniversary of something like the Winnipeg General Strike. I think we have to be very careful. General strikes are known to be disruptive: disruptive to the economy, disruptive politically, disruptive to a society. To laud that period of time in 1917 and the Winnipeg General Strike, especially after we heard over this last weekend of members of the opposition supporting, as they should and as they have every right to and as we would all support with a healthy labour movement, the ability to picket, when we start to hear people, either inside or outside of this Chamber, supporting the concept of a general strike, I would be very, very, very careful.

I would be interested to hear if the members on the opposite side would be willing to clearly stand up and deny their support for the concept of a general strike. I would be very interested to hear if they would be willing to couch some of their rhetoric and put some parameters on their rhetoric. To worry more about what other countries are thinking about how we legislate in this province than listening to the people of this province and generating legislation that works for the people of this province – rather than trying to force them into the straitjacket of class warfare philosophy, I would suggest that perhaps somebody has to reconsider what they believe would be best for the people of Alberta.

I'm very happy to be able to stand up and support Bill 26. I'm very happy to see that we have brought some common sense, that they asked for, back into this community, that some farms and ranches will be exempt from the Labour Relations Code, that therefore farm workers will not have to face this issue of unionization, that no government official will randomly inspect a farm or a ranch, that OH and S will visit a farm should there be an incident that needs to be investigated that involves a waged, nonfamily worker. Common sense.

I think that's the one thing that I would stress today, that I believe that the farm families across this province, especially in my constituency of Drayton Valley-Devon, wanted to say thank you. They truly appreciated the capacity to be involved in the consultations that went on across this province. They have seen the results of this bill, and they're happy with the results of this bill. They believe that they've been listened to. It gives me a great deal of pleasure to be able to say with regard to Bill 26: promise made, promise kept.

Thank you.

The Speaker: Hon. members, Standing Order 29(2)(a) is available. I see the hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar has risen.

Mr. Schmidt: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I just want to comment on one of the things that the Member for Drayton Valley-Devon said. I can't remember clearly if in his past life he was a social studies teacher or not. I'm not getting any response from the Member for Drayton Valley-Devon as to whether he was a social studies teacher or not. Yes, he was. So it makes it even more egregious, then, that

he would refer to the Winnipeg General Strike as happening in 1917. As a social studies teacher, of course, he should know that the Winnipeg General Strike happened in 1919. I hope that, you know, he sends out a corrected message to all of his former students who he may have misled in his career as a social studies teacher in leading them to believe that the Winnipeg General Strike was in 1917.

9:40

The Speaker: I also look forward to additional grammar corrections if you want to provide them.

The hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Devon.

Mr. Smith: Yes. I would thank the hon. member for helping me to get the date appropriate. As far as making mistakes as far as numbers are concerned, I guess we must all be happy that on this side of the House we're not making the same mistakes that the opposition made when we can look back and see that we have a $63 billion debt.

The Speaker: Are there any others wishing to join in the debate under Standing Order 29(2)(a)?

Seeing none, I will recognize the hon. Member for Edmonton-West Henday.

Mr. Carson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's an honour to rise today and bring forward a few of my thoughts on Bill 26 and, more importantly, my concerns with it. Of course, we've seen this government rush to move forward with this legislation. They campaigned on some form of what Bill 26 is, though they weren't very specific during the election what that would look like, and now we see that. Really, despite the name, Farm Freedom and Safety Act, there is nothing within this legislation that will actually increase safety on the farms across our province, so I'm not sure why they decided to put that in the text. Nevertheless, here we are.

Bill 26, of course, will repeal some or most of what was put forward in Bill 6. No more right to unionize, as we've heard from both sides of the House. We in the NDP caucus, of course, are not supporting the fact that this minister is trying to take away the rights of workers that are protected by the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. I suppose that is what I would mainly like to focus on for a moment, recognizing that in provision 2(d) everyone has the following fundamental freedoms, among them being the freedom of association.

In this legislation and as we've seen from this government through a lot of their legislation, they do not respect the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. They do not respect rulings that have been upheld by the Supreme Court. We saw that in Bill 9, when they forced public-sector unions to wait on negotiations that were moving forward. Of course, after that, now we have the government calling for a 5 per cent rollback of these wages, negotiating in bad faith despite what the labour minister, the agriculture minister, and everyone else on the front bench seems to think.

In that provision it expresses that

> freedom of association protects three classes of activities: (1) the "constitutive" right to join with others and form associations,

which we're seeing attacked in this legislation,

> (2) the "derivative" right to join with others in the pursuit of other constitutional rights; and (3) the "purposive" right to join with others to meet on more equal terms the power and strength of other groups or entities.

Mr. Speaker, we see similar provisions throughout other pieces of Canadian legislation and laws that are binding: article 1(e) of the Canadian Bill of Rights; article 22 of the international covenant on civil and political rights; article 8 of the international covenant on economic, social, and cultural rights; articles 1 to 11 of the International Labour Organization's convention 98. I could go on and on, but the fact is that this government is attacking the rights and freedoms that we as a country and as a province have protected through legislation, and rightfully so. Unfortunately, this government, I imagine because so many lawyers have donated to their party, needs to create jobs for these lawyers, and here we are.

Mr. McIver: No lawyer left behind.

Mr. Carson: No lawyer left behind, indeed, Mr. Speaker, as the member of the UCP caucus just brought forward. That does seem to be the real motto of this government. While they campaigned on jobs, pipelines, and freedom or whatever it may have been, really, what we're seeing is that getting lawyers jobs is their main goal. We see that once again in this legislation.

Of course, as has been laid out by our NDP caucus, we see the weakening of rules around overtime and overtime pay in this legislation, rolling back, once again, the protections that give workers the right to receive extra compensation after working in excess of eight hours in a day or 44 hours in a week. Unfortunately, this government doesn't believe that workers, whether they're farm workers or in any other industry, deserve to be paid fairly, and we see that in other pieces of legislation as well.

We also see that this government is exempting farm workers from employment standards regulations, Mr. Speaker, protections that are in place to ensure that the workers across this province, no matter what industry, are protected from unsafe working conditions. The Member for Drayton Valley-Devon pointed out the fact that farmers and ranchers work in an industry that is quite different from any other industry across this province, and I agree. The fact is that as hard as farm owners try, there are always going to be dangers on these sites, and we need to ensure to the best of our abilities that we are protecting those farm workers. Unfortunately, what we're seeing is an erosion of those protections through this legislation, which is very concerning.

The Member for Drayton Valley-Devon also pointed out, not to hang onto it too long – I don't intend to agree with anything that member says. He pointed out that the general strike that was being discussed earlier was disruptive, but the fact is that the protections that those workers were looking for through that general strike and the lack of protections was also disruptive, Mr. Speaker.

Now, once again this government – well, that member was saying that we essentially should be ashamed that we would say we would support workers that are trying to collectively get the safety standards that they should be afforded. Well, Mr. Speaker, at the same time this government just within the last couple of weeks was calling on the federal government to enforce antiworker back-to-work legislation. So here we have a member of the UCP caucus telling us that we should be ashamed while they once again are trying to push forward with things that are unconstitutional, Mr. Speaker.

Once again, we see a rollback of insurance in WCB coverage, and we had brought forward an amendment, I believe, Mr. Speaker, that would ensure that if a farm was to decide against WCB coverage and move to a private insurance – which in my opinion is fine as long as we're ensuring that the equal protections are there from what they were currently receiving from WCB. Unfortunately, this government did not feel it necessary to ensure that proper levels of insurance are in place on these farms, which is also concerning.

Now, overall, Mr. Speaker, the fact is that this legislation not only rolls us back to just prior to Bill 6, but it rolls us back way further than that even. It is Wednesday; this government seems to think it's way-back Wednesday, back in the 1800s, early 1900s. That seems

to be, unfortunately, where they're coming from with all of their bills, and we will continue to see the erosion of the ability of workers to protect their own interests under this government, to collectively engage in negotiations, as we've seen the erosion of that ability, which is extremely unfortunate, and I can imagine that we will see court challenges from this legislation. Once again we will see lawyers making their money and everyone else losing out.

Mr. Speaker, unfortunately, I cannot bring myself to support this legislation. I think it should go back to the drawing board, which is why I also supported an amendment we had brought forward to send this back to committee, which is really where it should go.

The fact is, as was pointed out by Gil McGowan, the AFL president, on the introduction of this legislation – now, I will say that I don't agree with everything Gil says, but in this instance where he says that "Albertans will no longer be able to track farm and ranch injury rates for the province. Boy, oh boy, Mr. Speaker, that sounds like a number that we should probably keep an eye on, yet here we are with this government no longer thinking that's important.

We saw this happening before the introduction of Bill 6. We swiftly made changes to that while also increasing the number of occupational health and safety officers across our province to ensure that investigations were happening and that safety was, in fact, in place. Unfortunately, once again from this government we see across-the-board cuts, which I imagine will affect those occupational health and safety workers, that traditionally are doing this work, which once again leaves these communities less protected.

9:50

Now, Mr. Speaker, once again I will point out the fact that I understand this government committed to this in their platform. Unfortunately, I think they have just gone way too far with this piece of legislation. I will also point out the fact that I understand that farmers and ranchers in our province work in exceptionally unique conditions, that they do know their workers the best, that they every day work hard to ensure that those workers are protected to the best of their abilities, and that they have strong relationships. There's no doubt about that, but the fact is that we as a government need to do our best to ensure that the legislation and the regulations in place are protecting every worker no matter what industry they work in.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Hon. members, Standing Order 29(2)(a) is available. I see the hon. Member for Central Peace-Notley.

Mr. Loewen: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I guess I'm finding it quite strange here listening to the members opposite talk about Bill 26. When I listened to the member opposite talk about us rushing Bill 26 through – obviously, the Minister of Agriculture and Forestry spent the summer, in fact since we were elected and since he was chosen as the minister, travelling across Alberta having open town halls in I don't know how many communities, probably about 25 different communities, asking farmers specifically what they would like to see as we repealed the failed Bill 6 that the previous government put forward. Now, I know that the members opposite, when they put through Bill 6, never had near, not even a fraction, the consultation that we've had with this minister with Bill 26, so the suggestion that this was rushed through – in fact, I believe we actually brought it . . .

Mr. McIver: Two whacks at Committee of the Whole.

Mr. Loewen: Yeah. We brought it back to Committee of the Whole for them so that they could have further discussion and bring forward further amendments on this bill, so the suggestion that we were rushing through is just absolutely bizarre. Now, it seems like every time somebody gets up there and speaks on that side, all they can talk about is unions. In fact, they're even quoting their lead researcher, Gil McGowan, on what he said about this bill.

Now, Mr. Speaker, we know what farmers felt about Bill 6. Bill 6 was deeply resented by the farming community across Alberta. There were rallies on the steps of the Legislature with Bill 6. The farmers spoke loud and clear, and they spoke loud and clear on election day when the members opposite never had one representative elected from rural Alberta. You know, they talk about things being quite different on the farm. The member opposite acknowledged that, and he's exactly right. Things are quite different on a family farm, and that's why we want to represent that in Bill 26. The members opposite, if we would look at what they brought forward when they first brought forward Bill 6 in the discussions – obviously, they had to back down on some of it. I'll tell you what: the agriculture industry still rejected it flat out.

It's interesting that the members opposite feel like they want to double down at this time when the agriculture industry spoke so loudly and clearly. I don't understand why they keep getting up and talking about and supporting their previous Bill 6, trying to talk against Bill 26 that honestly had a hundred times more consultation than Bill 6 did. I don't even know which agriculture sector or which farmer the NDP talked to when they brought in Bill 6, but I'll tell you that it couldn't have been anybody that I've been in association with, anyway, since I've been elected.

Mr. Speaker, you know, we keep hearing this over and over again from the other side, talking about Bill 26 and trying to disparage it. I think they're desperate. They're desperate to try to find something that they can disparage about Bill 26, but Bill 26 was consulted on with the agriculture industry. The minister travelled across Alberta and talked to farmers and asked what they wanted to see in this bill. Those are the facts, and obviously it's dramatically different from what those members on the other side did with Bill 6 when they were in government, when they brought that forward. In fact, that was probably the number one thing, that the consultation on it did not exist. In Bill 26, the consultation was there in 25 communities as the minister travelled around through the summer talking to farmers.

Again, it just seems like the members opposite want to double down on something that was an abject failure. At that point when they brought forward Bill 6, the trust was lost with the agriculture community. Here they keep furthering that mistrust with the NDP. I guess at one time I'll try to figure out why they keep going down this same path of failure.

Thank you.

The Speaker: Hon. members, we are back on Bill 26. Are there others wishing to join in the debate?

The hon. the Member for Edmonton-Decore.

Mr. Nielsen: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate you recognizing me this morning here to add my comments to Bill 26. Of course, this is only my second opportunity, but it will be my final opportunity to add some comments to a piece of legislation that I think is just looking for litigation.

I guess probably the easiest thing to say is that I don't have to work very hard, Mr. Speaker, to find something to criticize about this bill. It's actually quite effortless to do that. As I've said before on other debates, coming from labour, I also focus in on the language. What does the language mean? What does it imply? How does it affect people? That's what I like to focus in on when we're looking at pieces of legislation like this.

I'd given a little bit of, for lack of a better word, a shout-out to the Minister of Transportation in the earlier discussions. Like he had said before, I get it. The UCP won a majority government. They have the ability to change things that they see fit to change. That's their right. But I don't think they campaigned – unless somebody would like to point me to the direction in whichever copy of their election platform that it says that they were going to roll back basic human rights a hundred years by withdrawing pretty much the definition of employee that's contained on page 7 of Bill 26. I read it out earlier; I won't do that again. Everybody has the ability to look at this. It very much changes how an employee is described. It removes that, and that very clearly is a violation of human rights. You will most likely have litigation formed in this. However, we do see a pattern where this is something the government seems to relish, getting a chance to litigate in all kinds of different directions.

When you remove a person's ability just even simply to be called an employee, that opens up a potential for things to go sideways. As I'd mentioned earlier, I don't think there would be a single member in this House that would disagree with me when I say this. I think some of the farmers that we have here in the province are the best on the continent, bar absolutely none. But all it takes is one bad actor. You've seen those investigative reports where they rigged up a fridge and they called in a bunch of repairmen, and there's always one that just tries to push it too far and take advantage of somebody. I've seen it in my experience in the labour movement, where there are some fantastic employers.

I've always given a shout-out to Costco. They pay their workers well, they treat them with dignity and respect, they give them some benefits, and the working atmosphere is safe. And surprise, surprise: you're not able to unionize them.

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

10:00

In situations where you don't have an employer that treats people with dignity and respect, that doesn't provide a safe working environment, that doesn't pay them well, that doesn't give them any benefits, don't be surprised when they want to look for somebody to represent them.

So this bill, Bill 26, Madam Speaker, will set up those conditions to be possible, just like some of the conditions that are being set around insurance, okay? I had mentioned this earlier in debate, where there was a situation where a farm worker unfortunately had passed away on the job site, and she had to fight in court for six years and did eventually gain a judgment in her favour. What was the consequence? Obviously, six years of litigation, all the money that was being spent on that, and – how about that? – because of the judgment, it killed that farm. That farm had to shut down.

All it takes is one, one time when we have to pause and say: maybe we should address that. Usually what happens when we bring forward legislation, Madam Speaker, is that we are looking for those times, those one-offs – unfortunately, there's more than one-offs usually – where legislation has to prevent that from happening.

When you remove the language around somebody even being able to be called an employee, are they going to get at least minimum wage in this province, or are they going to be paid under it? I don't know. All it's going to take is one, at which point – you know, I think I heard one member state that they're expected to follow the occupational health and safety rules. That doesn't mean that they will. Most will, and they'll do it happily. But all it takes is one, that one instance where a worker gets severely injured or possibly even loses their life. Is that when we're willing to stand in front of those family members and say: "Well, you know, there was an expectation for that to happen. We don't know why it did. It shouldn't have. The rules were right there." So it's language like this that's contained in Bill 26 that I get very much hung up over. It's very, very difficult for me to be able to support that kind of language.

Like I said, I get it. You want to repeal what was Bill 6. I get it. You won the majority government. I don't think you ran on a mandate to turn things back a hundred years. I would argue that you don't have that. To put Albertans at risk or, even worse, temporary foreign workers that are brought in – like I said, I've seen farmers. My cousin has a cherry farm in B.C. and has gone to the ends of the Earth to support her employees, but I can't say for certain that a hundred per cent of people will do that. We've seen it. Like I said, those little investigator reports are really interesting, watching those things where they set up a situation to see how many will actually be honest about it. There's always one, but it's that one time that will come back to bite us on this legislation. It will force the government to have to stand in front of that family and say: yeah; sorry; we messed that up.

I hope that as we move forward on this bill – and I know it will get passed. If something should go wrong, I'm hoping that this government and this minister will stand up, take responsibility, and own the situation that you've now potentially created.

Thanks, Madam Speaker.

The Deputy Speaker: Standing Order 29(2)(a) is available. I see the hon. Minister of Agriculture and Forestry.

Mr. Dreeshen: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I'd just like to comment in response to that member and some previous speakers from the opposition. Again, the mindset of the NDP that somehow farmers are out to exploit their workers and that there's a violation of human rights happening down on the farm, that is so far from reality. It's very frustrating. I know that on our consultation tour that frustration was also shared by farmers. They always felt that they were being attacked by the members opposite.

I mean, Madam Speaker, when you look at the people who profit from a labour movement, when you look at people that profit from creating an artificial fear narrative between job creators and the people that actually work for them, it's interesting to see members opposite. He proudly always says that he comes from labour. That socialist class warfare, that narrative that always has to be promoted by people in that space, is alarming, I think. Their quasi arm's-length NDP researcher, Gil McGowan, even wrote an article about me, calling me a "proto-authoritarian servant of employers." If that's socialist speak for supporting job creators in the province of Alberta, I guess I'll proudly wear that label from the NDP researcher, Gil McGowan, from AFL.

Also, there was a history lesson. I know I shouldn't go down a path, Madam Speaker, to follow the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar. He was very quick to criticize a member on our side that was off by two years on a date. I'm not a social studies teacher, and my history is a bit hazy. They've said numerous times in this House that this bill goes back to pre-Industrial Revolution. It's my understanding that that's, you know, Britain 18th century . . .

Mr. Smith: In 1750.

Mr. Dreeshen: . . . 1750, not Alberta 2014. Again, they're off by a couple of hundred years, 200-plus years. I mean prior to Bill 6 when I say that this bill brings us back. I'd hate to see any of those members back anything up on a farm because I'm pretty sure they'd run over whatever they were trying to back up to.

Also, when it comes to temporary foreign workers, that's a completely separate issue. This bill won't address that. They're under their own special federal rules. Madam Speaker, again this goes to, you know, the radical activists that members opposite seem to be able to promote, radical activists that came on Alberta farms. There's this push against farmers and the way that they do business. We on this side are proud of our farmers. Whether they're a dogsled operation out near Canmore or a turkey farm in southern Alberta, we're proud of the hard-working farmers that we have here in the province of Alberta. We'll always stand and promote and do everything we can to protect them from radical activists, that have these radical ideas that you keep hearing from members opposite as well as from radical groups across the province.

Ultimately, it's something that other provinces are following suit on. Ontario actually introduced stronger legislation on protecting its farmers as well, and other provinces are looking at taking examples from Alberta. It is great to see that we are leaders here in Alberta and that other provinces are following our example in protecting farmers and also farm workers.

One of the greatest parts of Bill 26, that I think is overlooked by the members opposite, is the increase of investment in the agriculture space. We've seen – I think it was a couple of months ago, actually, in your riding or just north of your riding, I believe, Madam Speaker – a $20 million investment in a new farming operation just north of Calgary. The CEO was very quick to say that with coming changes to Bill 6, that was the confidence that they had to invest here in the province of Alberta and create more jobs for Calgary and region. It is something that I think was overlooked in this previous debate, how these changes are actually attracting investment, attracting great jobs here in the province of Alberta.

Again, as many of my colleagues have said, this bill was in development a long time and has the support of the agriculture community. Thank you.

10:10

The Deputy Speaker: That mushroom farm is indeed just north of Airdrie and in the wonderful constituency that I represent.

The hon. Member for Airdrie-Cochrane.

Mr. Guthrie: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I've been feverishly taking down some notes here just to try to address a few of the things that have come up. I do thank the Minister of Agriculture and Forestry for bringing Bill 26 forward. That was one of our campaign promises, and I think he's done a terrific job here.

You know, the last speaker from the opposition was talking about litigation and this being ripe for litigation. Well, last night the Leader of the Opposition stated in this place that she's going to lead that litigation, so I guess it's not surprising that they know that litigation is going to be coming forward. I think that that doesn't serve a good purpose since the people and farmers and ranchers of this province were asking for this.

Another thing that's been coming up. This has been coming up a lot. You know, we know that workplace safety on farms and ranches is of utmost concern. The accident numbers that come out from farms and ranches are not accurate. Anything that happens on farmland and anything that happens on a ranch qualifies: unrelated car accidents, heart attacks. Anything that would be a home-related accident is actually considered a farm accident because your farmhouse is right on your ranch.

Now, you know, I'm not going to minimize farm accidents and farm safety. I know about this, and I know about it first-hand. There have been enough incidents that I've seen that make me fully appreciate how dangerous a job it can be. In fact, that's how I got into farming and ranching. It was because of a farming workplace accident.

My wife's family are farmers and ranchers in Consort. My brother-in-law was the youngest in the family of four, and he was going to take over the family farm. At 26 years of age he was working down at the feedlot, and there was an auger in one of the bins. When you're finished using an auger, you will make sure – farmers and ranchers know this – that the auger is empty. This particular auger still had grain in the top, so when he went to move the auger, it started to tip over. It was big, and there was a lot of weight in it. He tried to hold it down, but my brother-in-law was unable to do that. It threw him in the air. He either hit his head on the way up or on the ground. It left him a quadriplegic, and he later passed away. Because of this there was a family decision that was made by my wife and me. We were in Vancouver at that time. We moved to Consort, and we started our life on the ranch.

I know that every farmer has stories like this, and we all know about farm safety. Family farms and their employees are just that; they're part of the family. We take care of family. Last night I listened to the Leader of the Opposition talk about ranchers, talk about them not paying their bills, that because there's no minimum wage, they're going to pay $3 an hour – as if somebody is actually going to work at $3 an hour – and that there would be no obligation to pay. I mean, it's just outrageous, the kind of things that I was hearing from her as well as from the opposition, claiming that they're going to shortchange their employees. I mean, how ridiculous.

I left the farming business 10 years ago. At that time we were paying temporary employees 20 bucks an hour. That's a decade ago. It's called the marketplace. The marketplace dictates the wage. As far as not paying, you're in a contract with this person when you hire them; of course you're going to pay.

You know, also, another thing that this addresses – and it's a good one – is that there are farms such as berry farms that are out there. They operate on, well, a minimum type of a wage plus a production wage. They incentivize their staff. They'll have a wage plus an amount based upon, say, the amount or the weight per hour that you bring in in production through the day. Actually, it can be quite lucrative for their employees. But the raising of the minimum wage slowed down their production. It actually decreased production on these farms. This helped to address that issue.

You know, talking about Bill 6 and some of the rules and the regulations that came forward, some friends of mine that are farming in that Consort area have a 1,000-head cow-calf operation. It's basically him and his brother that work the farm, and they have one employee. What Bill 6 did was that it gave them so much fear about having their staff work with cattle that they wouldn't let them work with cattle anymore. The two brothers could work with the cattle, but their employee had to go and do other work because of that fear that somebody may get injured. The OH and S regulations that came forward, et cetera: it's not practical. The employee wasn't happy either. A person that's working on a farm and a ranch: they want to be working with cattle. That's what they love. They love animals. Now they're being told that they couldn't do it just because of some silly regulations.

Bill 6 took these OH and S regulations and applied them directly to the cattle industry, and it didn't make any sense. You know, I'll tell you something. Cattle: they don't listen. Cattle don't follow procedure. I'll tell you that. It's not like you're going to work on a boiler and can take a set procedure and work step by step through it and that every time it's going to be exactly the same. Cattle don't work like that.

As far as timing is concerned and hours, you know, on our feedlot – we had a feedlot – in the spring we had cattle in that had to be fed,

and you have to look at animal health every day. But then you have an overlap there, where you're seeding and you're calving. The hours that are necessary here: they're odd. They're odd hours. Those calves have got to be checked every three hours, certainly. If you have a heifer calving, you're going to be sitting there watching her for a while. You cannot have strict, set-out hours because animals lives can be at risk.

Once again, Madam Speaker, I am very happy to see Bill 6 come forward. I think this is a very practical approach. It makes sense, and farmers and ranchers asked for it. Thank you once again to the minister for bringing this forward.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

10:20

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

Seeing none, any other speakers to the bill?

Seeing none, would the minister like to close debate? The hon. Minister of Agriculture and Forestry.

Mr. Dreeshen: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I think that it's great to see all the differing opinions on this bill. Again, it's gone to Committee of the Whole twice. I think that it's the first bill that we've had here in this Chamber that's achieved that. It goes to show the importance.

Again, the great leadership of our House leader and his respect for democracy to be able to have that flexibility and allowing further debates on bills and issues that are near and dear to the hearts of both sides of the House: I would commend him on that procedural endeavour.

Also, Madam Speaker, I'm thrilled to see that we've come so far. I know that this may be our last day here in the Chamber, and in the spirit of Christmas it's great to see something that I think might be a great gift to the farming community right before Christmas.

Thank you very much. I would like to move closure of debate.

[Motion carried; Bill 26 read a third time]

Government Bills and Orders
Committee of the Whole

[Mrs. Pitt in the chair]

The Chair: Hon. members, I would to call the Committee of the Whole to order.

Bill 20
Fiscal Measures and Taxation Act, 2019

The Chair: Are there any speakers? The hon. Member for Edmonton-North West.

Mr. Eggen: Well, thank you, Madam Chair. I rise with great interest to have further discussion around Bill 20. Again, we find that bills 20, 21, and then 22, which passed through this House at lightning speed, were all omnibus bills with many egregious elements to them. Quite frankly, it takes a while for people to unpack each part of this substantial bill and provide some constructive criticism for each section.

The part that I want to just talk about here today: you'll find it on page 64 of Bill 20. I can see everybody furiously getting out their bills. How many pages are in this bill in total, anyway? It is unbelievable, right? A hundred and two pages, at least nine or 10 different major sections, changing the landscape of everything from personal income tax – this is the creepy tax-creep bill that will take $600 million out of the pockets of everybody, really. It's an income tax hike that doesn't exclude any Albertan, really, maybe the very richest. It's entirely possible if they have very clever tax lawyers, I guess. It moves through, you know, anything from the green line, as we've talked about before, to taking a shot at the film and television industry, with tech industries leaving the province. You know, it's just a train wreck, Madam Chair.

But the area that I want to talk about here this morning is on page 64 of the bill, and this is in regard to postsecondary learning. The essence of this section is to establish enrolment targets for postsecondary institutions around the province. Again, this is a radical departure from how our postsecondary institutions did administer themselves and work on the ground to ensure that they are meeting the demand for various sorts of training and making decisions based on what the needs are for industry as well.

Here we have, in the midst of all of that, a long-standing tradition of postsecondary institutions making sound and considered decisions around funding various departments and so forth. For example, NAIT and SAIT have, you know, their very organic way by which they determine spaces for trades, let's say. We can take the examples of plumber and pipefitter. Currently this is determined by positions for apprenticeship. This is a very reasonable way, by which you have a connection between hands-on training over a period of years for an apprentice and then moving back into the classroom from time to time, in either NAIT or SAIT, to receive more formal instruction as part of the apprenticeship program. It works pretty well.

You know, I hear lots of noises from this government about wanting to emphasize the trades, for example, and, you know, that is very interesting. Here we are now on page 64 of Bill 20, where the long arm of the bureaucratic interference of this government is moving into making enrolment targets from the desk of the minister of postsecondary education. I love to – well, I don't love it. I mean, we hear ad nauseam from this government about how they want to free the marketplace and all this kind of thing – right? – and then here we are with another example of them reaching deep into postsecondary education and building an infrastructure for them to determine, from the lofty desk of the postsecondary minister, enrolment targets for postsecondary institutions around the province.

I mean, I find this to be a huge problem. I find it to be going against the principles of reason and common sense that have determined the various departments that we have in our postsecondary institutions for learning, you know, a whole universe of relevant and useful things that help to drive our economy, to help build better citizenship, to upgrade individuals so that they can have a more fulfilling life, to increase economic opportunities for people in a reasonably equitable way, which is what we use education for, to reduce barriers for individuals to better themselves both as individuals and as workers and so forth. But here we have the government, this UCP government, reaching in and changing all of that.

It's a problem, Madam Chair, quite frankly. I know that postsecondary institutions are not happy about this. Slowly this information is disseminating amongst students as well. I mean, this is a change that will affect the future prospects of thousands of students that are, let's say, probably in grade school right now, where you're literally changing their ability to make choices about what sort of education they want to get, what sort of future they might be pursuing. Instead, you have the long arm of the UCP government in Edmonton telling people what to do and what to learn based on setting enrolment targets from the central planning committee of the UCP politburo or whatever they call it. Oh, I guess it's called the cabinet, right? You know, that is a problem.

Fortunately, though, Madam Chair, we're here to help, right? The Official Opposition is here. We work day and night to make sure that we provide constructively critical amendments to make life better for Albertans and even make life better, quite frankly, for the UCP government. This will help them, you know, have a more judicious and expeditious governance of postsecondary education by not going down the road of setting enrolment targets, enrolment quotas for individual departments in our postsecondary institutions around the province.

10:30

So it's kind of like an early Christmas gift, Madam Chair, from our Official Opposition to the government here for us to consider. I have an amendment that I think will help, help everyone, and I expect no thanks but, rather, a robust debate on the amendment that I have for this section of Bill 20.

Thank you.

The Chair: This will be known as amendment A5.

Hon. Member for Edmonton-North West, please proceed.

Mr. Eggen: Okay. Thanks, Madam Chair. I move that Bill 20, Fiscal Measures and Taxation Act, 2019, be amended in section 24 in the proposed section 122.1 by striking out "in consultation with public post-secondary institutions" wherever it appears and substituting "after consultation of not less than 6 months with public post-secondary institutions, and their affected faculties and students."

That's a pretty good compromise, I think. Really, I think that the government has little to no business sticking their fingers into setting quotas for postsecondary institutions. They do a very good job of managing those things – thank you very much – already. So, you know, this amendment kind of gives a little bit of a nod to perhaps whatever thought processes, or lack thereof, went into this particular section of Bill 20. My amendment here, then, compels at least the government to enter into a consultation period for a number of months and includes the public in that consultation, too – right? – including the students. Lord knows, the students should have a say in how their education goes. They pay tens of thousands of dollars to go to school, and suddenly, if they hear that the minister from Edmonton suddenly pulls the rug out from their studies, then they should have this period of time to both maybe take a sober second look at that decision and indeed have a consultation around it with the teachers and the students and the administration of said postsecondary institution.

At this point in time, Madam Chair, you know, we need to, I think, repair some damage that's taken place over these last couple of months. This government went in hard and created a lot of shock and consternation around their attitude towards postsecondary education. We saw them, for example, opening the door in their very own documentation to 21 to 23 per cent tuition increases over the next few years. They've taken away the ability for students to claim a tax credit for their tuition – right? – which many people depended on to balance their modest budgets as a student and to continue on with their studies. You see this attempt in Bill 20 to set quotas and targets for university and for colleges and trades and so forth as well.

I mean, I think that we also saw a huge operating cut to grants to various postsecondary institutions. We saw the complete elimination of the maintenance grant for postsecondary institutions, which is astounding, quite frankly. In a broader sense, if we cast our eye a bit broader, we saw the elimination of the STEP program, that thousands of students depended on to, you know, help pay for education by getting jobs in their field, which is a very essential part of, I think, a modern approach to education, to get experience in perhaps a related field that you're studying in so that you can add that to your resumé and become more employable in time.

The list goes on, Madam Chair, of I think a concerted attack on postsecondary education, of which this section of Bill 20 is one. I'm offering some small change here in regard to making it at least a little more democratic and using the expertise and the experience on the ground and in the field between various administrations for different universities and colleges to talk about where they're going to go, put their priorities forward for education, and, of course, involve the students and the general public in that exercise, discussion as well. It's a pretty fair amendment, I think. It's nice. It's compact. Like I said, it's kind of like a little Christmas present here before the actual festivities begin. I believe that this amendment will help to assuage some of the other divisions and conflict that this government has created around postsecondary education.

I will cede the floor to others to talk about this, and I look forward to the discussion. Thank you.

The Chair: Any members wishing to speak to amendment A5? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. Schmidt: Thank you, Madam Chair, and I'm pleased to rise in support of the amendment that's been brought forward by my friend from Edmonton-North West. I want to thank him for trying to make what is a terrible piece of legislation a little less terrible.

It was interesting, Madam Chair, that during the estimates discussion with the Member for Calgary-Bow he stated that his goal was to increase Alberta's postsecondary participation rate, which up until recently has been the lowest in the country. That's nothing that anybody should be proud of here in this room. If we want to have a vibrant, dynamic, growing province, we need more students to be going to university or college in this province, and I applaud the Member for Calgary-Bow for stating that his goal is to increase participation rates in postsecondary education here in the province of Alberta. Just for the record that was also my goal when I was Minister of Advanced Education in the last government because participation rates in postsecondary education have been flat for a number of years. It's interesting, though, the different approaches that he and I took to the issue of increasing student participation in postsecondary education. It was our view as a government that in order to get more students into universities and colleges, those institutions needed funding to run their operations. That's why we increased funding for universities and colleges by 2 per cent every year.

They also needed new classroom spaces, and that's why we invested in a significant expansion of infrastructure on campuses all across the province. The new science complex at the University of Lethbridge just opened up this year. That has dramatically expanded classroom capacity at the University of Lethbridge. The government is still investing in the renewal of the MacKimmie complex at the University of Calgary. That will dramatically expand classroom facilities at the University of Calgary. We invested in the renewal of the Dentistry/Pharmacy building at the University of Alberta. That building was being almost unused because it was in such a state of disrepair, and investing in the renewal of that building will dramatically increase the number of classroom spaces that are available to students at the University of Alberta.

10:40

We invested in a new campus in High Prairie for Northern Lakes College, which was desperately needed. High Prairie campus of

Northern Lakes College was an old Alberta forestry trailer that had any number of dead animals in the air space between the bottom of the trailer and the ground surface, which, I joked with the chair of Northern Lakes College, provided all-you-could-eat meals for the students there if they were interested in that. That, fortunately, won't be the case any longer, and the students in High Prairie will have a modern, expanded classroom space in which they can conduct their learning.

You know, we increased funding that was available for their operations. We dramatically increased support for expanding classroom spaces. We invested in maintaining the existing classroom spaces because the previous government had left a significant infrastructure deficit behind on campuses all across the province. That was the institutional side of the investments that we made in order to increase public participation rates.

Oh, we also invested in new tech seats. Our plan was to invest $50 million over five years to increase the number of seats in tech-related programs by approximately 3,000 spaces. I appreciate that the government is still planning to continue funding for the 400 or so spaces that were created in the last days of our government. It's a shame that the government is not going to continue to invest in those spaces, that are much needed, or were, at least until the government decided that it was not interested in supporting development of the tech sector in Alberta. I guess that if we're not going to support the development of tech-related industries in the province, there's no need in continuing to invest in tech-related education spaces in universities and colleges according to how the members opposite approach the issue of economic diversification.

That was the institutional side, Madam Chair. Then, of course, we recognize that finances are a huge barrier to many students attending university and college. I can't tell you how many potential students I met during my tenure in Advanced Education and still meet today who rule out the possibility of even going to university or college because they think that they can't afford it. We tried to tackle that by freezing tuition rates for four years. We also froze mandatory noninstructional fees for the same period of time and eliminated the ability of institutions to introduce new mandatory noninstructional fees, which meant that during the last four years Alberta went from the most expensive place to go to university to the middle of the pack. While other provinces were increasing their university tuition and fees, ours remained flat, so comparatively it became much more affordable to go to university or college in Alberta than in other jurisdictions in the country.

We dramatically expanded access to student loans, and we kept those student loan rates affordable. We increased the number of scholarships and grants that were available. We introduced the indigenous grant, which provided tuition and fee support for indigenous students who were studying at university or college. We created an apprenticeship grant for apprentices who weren't employed but wanted to continue with their technical training. That resulted in thousands of unemployed apprentices being at least able to continue in their technical training while they were still trying to find work so that they had the technical skills to be able to advance their apprenticeship.

We also invested significantly in mental health supports for students so that students who were already in university or college and experiencing the stress related to studies and all of the things that go on for young people while they're in university or college could get the help that they needed. So not only were they healthy, but they were well enough that they could continue on with their studies and complete the programs that they were in so that they were able to graduate. That was also a significant support for students.

Now, contrast that approach with the approach that the Member for Calgary-Bow was taking in trying to increase participation rates. He's scrapping the education and tuition tax credits, so that will make it less affordable for students to go to school. He's scrapping the tuition fee freeze and allowing universities and colleges to increase tuition by up to 20 per cent over the next four years, so that's going to be another fee hike. He's also increasing the rate of interest on student loans. It's going from prime to prime plus 1 and a half, I believe. That's going to be a significant hit for the tens of thousands of student loan holders already in the system. All of those legislated fee increases are going to hit students severely.

Included in that have to be the indirect fee increases that are going to result from the cuts that the Member for Calgary-Bow is making to the university and college grants. They have to make that money up somehow. They can't make it all up from tuition, so all of the ancillary fees related to going to university or college are going to go up. That means that residence fees are going to be more expensive, meal plan fees are going to be more expensive, and parking fees are going to be more expensive. We've already seen a number of universities announce increases to those fees for the next year. All of those things are going to make it much less affordable for Alberta's potential students to go to university. I think that's going to have a chilling effect. There are a lot of people who are in high school or junior high right now who are wondering whether or not they can even afford to go to university or college, and they're going to decide to not go because the Member for Calgary-Bow and this government have made the financial barriers to getting a university or college education too high for many of them to overcome.

In addition to that, though, not only is the Member for Calgary-Bow making it more expensive for students to go to school, but he's also reducing the capacity of universities and colleges to undertake their work. He's got a plan to reduce the government grants by half over the next period of years. Not only will we not be able to increase enrolment in most programs; it's going to mean reduced enrolment in most programs and the elimination entirely of a lot of programs, we suspect. It's already having a negative effect on postsecondary education. We see hundreds of people being laid off at the University of Calgary already, and we expect hundreds more to be laid off at institutions all across the province in the coming days.

In addition, of course, the capital grants have been reduced to a paltry $12 million, from $120 million to $12 million, over the next fiscal year, Madam Chair. Universities and colleges won't even be able to afford to replace their light bulbs with that little money. Construction of new projects has ground to a halt. This government has committed to building almost nothing new on university and college campuses over the next three or four years. I don't know. I honestly can't see how the Member for Calgary-Bow is going to increase public participation in postsecondary education when he's making it way more expensive for students to go to school, eliminating their ability to deliver most programs, and saying that they can't build any new classroom spaces over the next four years. When pressed, the Member for Calgary-Bow really didn't have a good answer. I suspect that these enrolment targets are one of the tools he expects to use to increase participation rates, but how is he going to do that?

10:50

One of the things that is true about the postsecondary sector is that the level of compliance you get with government direction is directly related to the amount of money that you give them in government grants. Universities and colleges are not like schools, where they get all of their funding from the provincial government

and have very tight control over curriculum, enrolment, all of those things. Universities and colleges are much more independent from government direction than the primary school system and the secondary school system, and that's the way it should be, Madam Chair. I couldn't imagine what universities and colleges would look like if the members opposite had direct control over what they would offer. I suspect that the University of Alberta would have only two faculties, a faculty for oil and a faculty for gas, and everything else would be shut down.

It's critical to the academic enterprise that government intervention be limited as far as possible. That's why we're bringing forward this amendment, so that at least the Member for Calgary-Bow can't get up in the morning and arbitrarily decide to cut enrolment to a philosophy program at the University of Calgary by 75 per cent and mandate an increase in – I don't know – petroleum engineering at the University of Alberta by 150 per cent just at his own whim. I think that my friend from Edmonton-North West is correct in saying that these enrolment targets need to be set at least in consultation with public postsecondary institutions over a period of six months to make sure that all of those consultations consider the affected faculties and students.

Six months is a reasonable period of time for conducting these consultations. Academic institutions are not nimble organizations, let's say, and they make the direct civil service appear fast and lean in comparison. Six months is a reasonable time, I think, for academic institutions to conduct these consultations to see whether or not the enrolment targets that the Member for Calgary-Bow wants to impose on them will be reasonable. I think that it makes sense to include everybody who has a stake in the future of the postsecondary system to have their say as to whether or not these enrolment targets make sense.

Like I said, in an ideal world we wouldn't be discussing this kind of legislation at all. The minister would just let universities and colleges continue to do the good work that they've already been doing for a number of years, consulting with industry and consulting with the public already to set their enrolment targets. They already do that, Madam Chair. A number of programs at universities and colleges all across the province already have committees comprising students and faculty and potential employers to look at the program, whether or not it's meeting everybody's needs, and decide how the programs can be improved to do that. I don't think that allowing the Member for Calgary-Bow and his cabinet colleagues to get their fingers into the process will improve things. I think it will actually damage the academic enterprise.

Of course, we've already seen that certain members across the way don't have a lot of respect for academics in the first place. We know that the Member for Calgary-Lougheed has accused professors of being communists. You know, he's tried to smear the name of an expert in political science by making allegations that her work is unworthy because of her affiliation with the federal NDP. So this is all part of a pattern, Madam Chair, of undermining the academic enterprise, broadly speaking.

I think that this amendment will at least limit the amount of damage that the members opposite are seeking to do to our postsecondary education sector, and I think it would be wise for all members of this Assembly to vote in favour of this amendment so that we have a rational and reasonable process, at the very least, for setting enrolment targets rather than just allowing the minister at his own discretion to set them without consultation, without any consideration to the effects that his decisions will have.

With that, Madam Chair, I encourage all of my colleagues here in the House to vote in favour of this amendment, and I want to thank again my friend from Edmonton-North West for bringing forward such a reasonable amendment and at least trying his hardest to limit the damage to postsecondary education that this bill in its original form is set to do.

The Chair: Are there any other members wishing to speak to amendment A5? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford.

Mr. Feehan: Thank you, Madam Chair. I appreciate the opportunity to address this very wrong-headed bill and to talk about some of the concerns that have been expressed across the province of Alberta about the single-minded and negative perspective that is being taken by this government with regard to its finances and specifically with regard to the Fiscal Measures and Taxation Act, which reveals quite significantly the government's lack of understanding of the work that's being done across this province to redeem us from some of the difficult economic times that we've had over the last few years.

I think that we can see, by reading the daily paper, that judgment is already in on this bill and all of the economic bills of this government when we see in the last few days Moody's bond-rating agency downgrading the province of Alberta because their economic plan fails to take into account any future thinking. They specifically cite, of course, particular aspects of that failure with regard to a complete failure of looking at the revenue side of the question in this province and a complete failure to . . .

The Chair: Hon. member, we're on amendment A5.

Mr. Feehan: I do understand that. I'm talking . . .

The Chair: Okay. I assumed you were getting there.

Mr. Feehan: Yeah. Certainly.

Moody's also talked about a failure to move off the reliance that we've had on our natural resources in this province, not that we shouldn't have done what we did to try to generate as much income as we could from our natural resources. The issue that Moody's cites is the failure to understand that a singular emphasis is unacceptable. As a result, we have a downgrade, and this is what brings us to this amendment here, and that is that the government is failing to understand that if we actually are going to resolve the economic problems in this province, we need to create as much diversity as we possibly can in this province. That diversity depends on the ability to understand where the economies of the world are going and to ensure that we are ready to take advantage of and be a part of those movements in the economies of the world.

11:00

We know, for example, that tech industries are absolutely on the rise around the world. More and more we are seeing people not driving trucks to make a living but, rather, working on computers to make a living. While we'll need a quite wide range, including truck drivers and so on, we know that the majority of jobs will come from these kinds of tech industry jobs. We see Mary Moran of Calgary Economic Development telling us that we have lost a significant digital company, who bailed out of this province because of the focus of this particular government. We have seen the loss of tech jobs at universities because of this government's failure to continue with the plan that had been put forward by the previous government, all of this telling us that the government is trying to pick a singular winner in terms of Alberta's future instead of allowing the marketplace of ideas to move forward and create places in our universities that are responsive to the needs of the community around them.

In this particular case, the government has decided that as well as not supporting universities through the various programs that we

have, they would actually begin to try to control universities by introducing themselves into the question of enrolment in various programs. Now, this is problematic on a number of levels because one of the things that's quite clear to me is that this government doesn't understand the nature and value of the universities in this province. While we were capping tuition fees in this province to encourage more students to go to universities, while we were providing more money to universities so that they could provide services for students, while we were building more classroom spaces at universities and colleges around this province and we were funding particular spots in the tech industry, doing all of these positive things, we see this government instead taking away tax credits. We see the government reducing the students' ability to attend university by increasing tuition. All of these things are attacking universities instead of supporting universities to do the good work that they do.

Given that they do not seem to understand the function of a university in society, I'm very concerned about them having the ability to begin to dictate to universities the nature of enrolment. As a result, I think it's very important that they step aside, that they go back to the people who actually know a lot about enrolment, how to encourage enrolment, how to establish enrolment in relationship to the needs of the society around us, and allow them to do that. Universities and colleges all have programs in which they look at enrolment enhancement. It's a common practice at every university to have those discussions on an ongoing basis. They design programs based on that, not based on the whim of the government in order to support a particular industry but, rather, on the long-term trends that are needed in a community or a province. Those are the people that government should be working with to ensure that they have the right enrolment processes in place.

Government's role should be to provide them the resources to do that well, but they're taking away all of the resources to do these kinds of things rather than providing those resources, something that doesn't make sense. If you want something to succeed, why would you suffocate it? Why would you make it more difficult for it to happen? Why would you create structural barriers that make it more unlikely that the thing that you want is going to occur?

I think that we've learned a lot over the last number of years about how small factors can make a difference in terms of people's decision-making and that those factors often are not understood well by the people who are making the decision yet strongly influence their decisions. Many people have had the opportunity to read, for example, the book called *Nudge*, which tells us a number of stories about how people's decision-making can be influenced by just making sure that the easiest decision, the most straightforward decision is the one that has the greatest benefit and the greatest outcome. For example, in the book they talk about people applying for life insurance, and if the number on your form when you first sign up is different, then you're more likely to actually put money aside for insurance. It has nothing to do with people making a judgment about it. It's just what happened to be on the form when they signed it when they got employment.

From that, we learn that it's important that we understand: what are those structural kinds of barriers that tend to make people make a decision one way or the other? If our ultimate outcome is to increase the enrolment at a university, then we should look at: what are the kinds of things that are more likely to make a student want to go back to school? Well, the things that are going to make them want to go back to school are the belief that they'll be able to be successful in doing that, the belief that they will be able to get the monies that they need in order to be able to go to school, that they will be able to pay off those bills in a reasonable amount of time with whatever type of job they're able to earn when they graduate, that they will have good learning experiences at those schools, that they will have good instructors and good professors who will provide them with the knowledge that they need in order to be successful in the economy, that they'll have the resources at those schools such as the classrooms, the labs, the library facilities that will allow them to be successful.

Creating all of those opportunities is more likely to have people make the decision to go to a postsecondary institution, whether it's a college, a university, or a technical institution. Those are the kinds of decisions we should be making, but what we see is this government going in exactly the opposite direction. We see the government undermining the confidence of students about their own success or the success of their university to be able to provide them the resources that they need. We think it's really important that this government step back, that this government let universities do what universities do well, let colleges do what colleges do well and technical institutions do that as well, and that is for them to use good research to make decisions about enrolment and not political ideas in terms of, you know, what kind of behaviours on the part of the university will increase enrolment.

We know that, you know, frequently on this side of the House we present evidence to the government from various universities that indicates that the choices that they're making are not going to achieve the results that the government thinks they're going to achieve. We've demonstrated time and time again that trickle-down economics, for example, doesn't work. We've indicated time and time again that minimum wage is a good way to ensure that people at the lower income have the monies that they need to survive well and that increasing minimum wage does not damage small businesses.

All of these are pieces that came from universities that were able to use good research and appropriately developed statistics in order to demonstrate the basis on which social policies should be made, yet the government has rejected all of this good research all the time, again demonstrating a distaste for the knowledge that comes from universities, a disbelief that the people who have created that knowledge bring value to our society, and that's very problematic here. The overall trend in this government has been to decide that academics and scholarly learning are not worth supporting and are not to be believed in terms of making policy decisions, which is very concerning for many of us because it is that kind of knowledge development which has allowed us as a province and, of course, all western democracies to develop a very good lifestyle for a significant number of people in this province and, of course, across Canada and across the western world.

11:10

It is the academics in engineering and the academics in history and the academics in nursing who have all contributed to a better way of being in this province, to a lifestyle which has seen significant reductions in dangers to us in the community, significant increases in general health and well-being, changes that have made the life of the average person much better than it was five years ago, 10 years ago, or 50 years ago. That institution has done that extremely well, and as a result we think it's important that the institution be encouraged to continue to do that kind of work and that we trust the processes of good scientific research and knowledge in order to make decisions. The experts on that development of knowledge are universities and colleges and technical institutions. They are the experts on how to research and evaluate what good information is. They develop the techniques that allow us to do that.

Yet when it comes time for them to use that same scientific reasoning and knowledge to develop their own programs, we

suddenly have this government stepping in and saying: we are going to develop a process where it is the minister who begins to force enrolment in a particular area based on the minister's whims or needs. You know, this is perplexing given that just this morning we were listening to the minister of agriculture talking about the fact that we need to trust the experts in the field. He was talking about farmers. If I accept that, then why does he suddenly abandon that principle when it comes to people who are experts in other areas such as research and knowledge development? It doesn't make sense unless you really didn't believe the first one. Then I wonder: why the second? Why interfere with universities who are doing the work that they need to do in order to ensure that they have good enrolment?

Now, one of the problems is that we have a province that has a lower rate of enrolment in postsecondary than other provinces, so one of the things that we need to ask ourselves is why that is. What kind of research can we apply that would tell us the reasoning behind our lower enrolment? Well, lo and behold, it turns out that some of this research has been done, and it turns out that part of the reason why we have lower enrolment in this province is because fewer young men go to postsecondary than in other provinces. The reason why that happens is because they have had the fortune of being able to earn good incomes without getting a postsecondary education. We've been very fortunate in the oil and gas field to be able to provide people with income sometimes over $100,000 a year with no more than a grade 12 education. I'm very happy for those people. I'm glad that they've had the opportunity to succeed well and so on.

Overall, looking around the world, we know that that's an aberration, that we're not going to be able to depend on those kind of lucrative, productive kinds of jobs forever in this province, and as a result we need a different kind of job, a job that depends on people having the opportunity to upgrade their skills, to improve their circumstances through their own effort. That means going to postsecondary institutions where they can learn a set of skills that they would not naturally have had if they did not have the opportunity to spend time with good instructors who have spent many years developing skill sets and knowledge that they can pass on to students. That should be encouraged. It should be encouraged in this province that people who want to do well are given the tools to do well.

We know that in some fields it hasn't been necessary in the past in order to be able to get a good income in this province to have those kinds of postsecondary credentials to move on. But that's not the rule across the world. Across the world there is a very close relationship between postsecondary education and longer term financial stability. We need to understand that that's what the research indicates, and if that's what the research indicates, then we should use that good knowledge created by good postsecondary institutions in order to build toward the future. That's what universities and colleges and technical institutions have been doing and doing well for many, many decades in this province.

Many of us here in this Chamber are quite proud to be graduates of institutions around the province of Alberta. Myself, I graduated from both the University of Alberta and the University of Calgary. I know many other people in this House have graduated from NAIT or SAIT or Mount Royal or MacEwan or many of the other great institutions in this province. I'd like to ask at this time for the government to show some respect for those institutions and to thank them for having provided them with the background necessary in order to be able to be as successful as we have been in this House. We thank them by honouring their strengths and their abilities and by including them in the decision-making regarding their own lives, and that is the concern of student enrolment numbers and program enrolment.

Thank you.

The Chair: Are there other members wishing to speak? The hon. Minister of Transportation.

Mr. McIver: Thank you, Madam Chair. I'm grateful for the opportunity to speak to this amendment on Bill 20. The amendment reads that we take out the words "in consultation with public post-secondary institutions" wherever it appears and substitute "after consultation of not less than 6 months with public post-secondary institutions, and their affected faculties and students."

Well, you can imagine my surprise as I listened to the last speech, that the hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford gave, Madam Chair, and you would be surprised with how much of what he said I agreed with. Yes, you heard that correctly. He said a lot of things that I agree with entirely. He said things like: let postsecondary institutions do what postsecondary institutions do well. I couldn't agree more. That's exactly what our legislation intends to do. He said that postsecondary institutions are the experts in the field and that we should listen to them, and that is exactly what I believe our minister of postsecondary education has done and what this legislation does. He does talk about the failure of what's gone on in the past. He talked about lower rates of enrolment and lower graduation rates, and I agree with that as well.

The fact is, Madam Chair, that this legislation is designed to actually take the handcuffs off of these postsecondary institutions and release the entrepreneurial abilities that they have. The NDP refused to take off those handcuffs and refused to open up the entrepreneurial knowledge and expertise that are in those institutions. They essentially kept them prisoner: "You will take the amount of money we give you. You're not allowed to raise any more. You will do what we say." They were very dictatorial and didn't allow them to be entrepreneurial, didn't allow them to raise their own money. We are actually doing essentially, through the legislation, what the hon. member had said we should do. Interestingly enough, it's what the government he used to be a part of refused to do.

The hon. member actually knew what to do. Their government just didn't do it. Well, this government isn't like that, Madam Chair. This government is going to work with the postsecondary institutions to allow them to express through their expertise the entrepreneurial abilities that they have to raise money in other ways; to bring in the private sector, perhaps, in different ways; to do land development on some of the university lands to create rent and lease revenue and other revenue from that; to actually be entrepreneurial and invest that money that they are now allowed to make, that they weren't allowed to make under the NDP, and invest it back into their postsecondary institution to improve the quality of education for their students and improve the quality of life for their students as they graduate.

11:20

What's interesting is that the hon. member that just spoke before – while I agree with much of what he said, the fact is that his government didn't do those things, and that's what several postsecondary institutions that I've talked to have said. They've said: "Listen, if you are going to give us less money in terms of direct funding, then you'd better take off the handcuffs. Let us raise some of our own money. We actually know how to do that." When they find out that we're going to give them that ability, they're actually in many cases quite pleased, more pleased than they have been in the past.

In fact, the hon. member said it himself when he talked about some of the stats. There is lower enrolment in Alberta, and of those enrolled, there's lower graduation than there should be.

Now, listen, anytime I talk to students, the ones that are in school and the ones that haven't gone to school yet, they say that – you know what? – they would like lower tuition. But when you extend the conversation past the first sentence, here's what they understand. They realize the choice. They're bright. Young people are bright, and they understand this. Sometimes I ask them: "So would you rather pay less during the four years that you're in school and then pay more for the 45 years that you're working after you graduate to support more of everybody else's school? Or would you rather pay a little more in your tuition and pay less for the 45 years that you're working for everybody else?"

Let me say this, Madam Chair. Not all of those students agree. They didn't all have the same answer. Some have just said: "Lower tuition. That's it. That's all I am interested in." But a lot of other ones have said: "You know, when you look at it that way, when you consider the 45 years during which I'm going to hopefully have a good-paying job and the government is going to be taking up to 40, 50 per cent of everything I earn in different forms of taxes, boy, having that lighter tax load for 45 years may be a positive offset to a little more tuition that I pay while I'm going to school." Again, not all students feel the same way about that. There are students on both sides of that argument. But I think, largely, they understand the argument.

I would say that the problem is that the NDP didn't understand the argument. They think that government should control everything, that government should tell the institutions how much money they're going to have and keep them coming to the government every year with the beggar's bowl to get enough money to hopefully run their programs. Well, governments of all stripes sometimes aren't the most reliable partners. Sometimes they're quite reliable; sometimes they're not that reliable. The postsecondary institutions in many cases would like to rely on themselves. That's one of the messages that we've heard. They would like to have the handcuffs off so that they can be entrepreneurial, so that they can raise some more of their money.

Let's face it, Madam Chair. Having emphasis on the postsecondary institutions to make sure that their students graduate and their students get good jobs thereafter is the best way to increase their students' quality of life. The one calculation when somebody finishes school is: how much money do you owe for going to school? That's a really important number, and we should never forget about that.

The other half of that calculation, that I think students understand, is: how many years is it going to take me working to pay that money back? If you owe a large amount of money and you can pay it back in a low number of years, that's not that bad. If you owe a little bit of money but it still takes you a long time to pay it back because of the employment position you might have, well, what looks good at the outset may not be so good at all if it takes a long, long time to pay off those students loans. So while I understand that every situation is different, I guess my point is that students understand that also. They understand the value of having a good career and a good job after they graduate and how that affects their quality of life thereafter.

Madam Chair, we intend to work with the postsecondary institutions. That's what our minister said. The folks across have said several times that he hasn't given good answers, but in fact they just didn't want to hear the good answers. They didn't want to hear that there's a different way to do it than to keep the postsecondary institutions as, essentially, beggars to the government. Rather, unleash the expertise that the previous member talked about.

I agree with what he said. They have tremendous expertise. They understand the research. There are many things that they're very good at. Our government wants to take the handcuffs off them, unlike the NDP, and say: "Okay. Be experts. We know you're experts; be experts. We know you can be entrepreneurial; be entrepreneurial. Raise money. Do other things that can improve the quality of education and the quality of life for students because we are going to take the handcuffs off you."

It's a different way of looking at things, a way that I would suggest to you the previous government was not willing to accept. Actually, if the previous government had listened to the very experts the previous speaker was talking about, that's what they were saying. That's what the postsecondary institutions were saying to us even while the NDP was in government: "They just don't let us do anything. They don't let us raise money. We could, but they won't let us. They want to control everything."

So, in fact, the place where I will disagree with the previous speaker is – what's different, I believe, about our approach is that the previous government wanted to control every element of what every school did, and we're saying: "No. We're going to give you a little less money upfront than you used to get, but we are going to unleash your ability to raise money, to be entrepreneurial, to be the captain of your own ship, to row your own boat, and to set your own direction."

You know, there's an old saying that is consistent with this, that the one who pays the piper calls the tune. Well, when the government is paying all the money, it's no wonder that under the NDP they wanted to call all the tunes. I guess from this side of the House we're saying that we're going to let the universities and the other postsecondaries raise some of their own money and call some more of their own tunes. We think that's consistent. We think that's fair, and we think it's actually consistent with what most of the postsecondary institutions have been telling us.

It's also inconsistent with this amendment in front of us because the amendment says to consult for six months. What the opposition doesn't realize is that our minister, unlike the previous government, actually talked to the postsecondary institutions before this legislation rolled out.

An Hon. Member: He is a doctor.

Mr. McIver: He's a PhD himself. I'm certainly not, but I believe he can speak to the postsecondaries on an academic level like I never could.

He actually did it, more to the point. He actually took the time to talk to the postsecondary institutions, to find out that they wanted to be more entrepreneurial, which is why this amendment, Madam Chair, would actually make the legislation worse instead of better, which is also why this side of the House will not be supporting it.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-West Henday on amendment A5.

Mr. Carson: Well, thank you, Madam Chair. It's a privilege to rise to speak to this amendment to Bill 20, once again, amending section 24 in the proposed section 122.1 by striking out "in consultation with public post-secondary institutions" wherever it appears and substituting "after consultation of not less than 6 months with public post-secondary institutions, and their affected faculties and students."

Madam Chair, it is indeed, as I just mentioned, a privilege to rise in this House, and I think that we also need to recognize that it is a privilege, first of all, of course, that we are in this House in the first

place, that we were elected here by our constituents, but also that we have the privilege to be sitting here at the point in our careers that we are in, most of us, I believe, out of postsecondary education, and at the wages that we receive, the compensation we receive as private members elected to this House, debating why the government thinks it's okay to increase costs for postsecondary students, people who because of this government are now facing reductions in minimum wages if they're under 17 or 18, trying to save to get to postsecondary education.

This government has told them that they do not deserve the same minimum wage as anybody else, which is very concerning. So it is a privilege for us to be standing here telling students – the UCP government is telling students that they think it's okay and actually should be celebrated that they're going to make it harder for students to attain postsecondary education.

Now, I have to say, Madam Chair, that I have great concern with some of the words that were just spoken by the Minister of Transportation and often with the things that are said on that side of the House. I don't have enough time to recognize everything that I have concerns with, but I will do my best here. The Minister of Transportation said that postsecondary institutions have been asking for these changes, have been asking to have enrolment targets forced upon them. I once again, as with most of the things that member says, question who he is hearing that from and would appreciate that that information be tabled if it is true. But the minister said that postsecondary institutions are entrepreneurs and that this government is simply unleashing their potential. By scaling back their funding to the tune of tens of millions if not hundreds of millions of dollars, they are unleashing these postsecondary institutions' entrepreneurial spirit. Unfortunately, I certainly disagree with that point. The fact is that this government is rolling back the amount of funding they get through grants and other means and is telling them that they need to meet arbitrary enrolment targets that this Advanced Education minister is going to once again arbitrarily set out.

11:30

Now, the Minister of Transportation just said that this amendment doesn't need to be in there because the Advanced Education minister consulted on enrolment targets already. Well, Madam Chair, that doesn't change the fact that any time this minister comes forward with an arbitrary enrolment target that they want to set out, there should be consultation done. It's one thing to say that these postsecondary institutions were consulted on the idea of enrolment targets, but then to say that they are totally fine with any enrolment targets that might be set out in the future is absolutely ridiculous.

Now, the Minister of Transportation once again also said that we need to listen to these postsecondary institutions, that they're asking for enrolment targets, that they're asking to have their funding reduced because somehow that ties their hands, and so now these institutions are going to be able to unleash their full potential. Well, really, what does that mean, Madam Chair? That means they are going to unleash their full potential to charge more to postsecondary students.

Now, I think about situations in my own family. I've spoken, to some extent, about the fact that my mother was 14 when I was born. She raised me as a single mother until I was about 12 years old, and she worked extremely hard to not miss a beat going through high school and then to further obtain a bachelor of arts degree from university. I think about the impact that pieces of legislation like Bill 20 have and the idea of enrolment targets, that a government should be able to arbitrarily set out targets for what kind of education students should receive, once again not even touching on the fact that this government has rolled back minimum wages for people like my own mother, who was trying to simply get by with what was given to her. It's very concerning, Madam Chair.

Once again, we have a government that is trying to force enrolment targets, that is forcing these institutions, by the reduction of grants and investments to postsecondaries, to actually increase tuition for students, and somehow the government expects us to celebrate that fact.

Now, the fact is, Madam Chair, that when we look at this legislation compared to the last piece of legislation that we were discussing, it's quite clear to see – and we see it every day – that this side of the House and the NDP caucus, compared to the UCP government, have very different ideas about what is good and what is bad regulation. On one hand, we have a government that is taking away regulations that should be in place. On the other hand, where we see regulations that shouldn't be in place like enrolment targets, they are actually putting them there. Of course, it's quite a difference of opinion here and a difference of ideology, but I am very concerned with what we're seeing.

The fact is that this government seems to be taking action to make enemies with every order of government. I'm not exactly sure why, but it continues on with postsecondary institutions. Well, I suppose I have some ideas, and it seems that when we look at the changes that this government has made to advocate roles, they're appointing party insiders, the president of their party at some point, to be the advocate for their constituents when they have concerns with the direction of the government. This UCP government has now put in place one of their party insiders, who is supposed to advocate for these people who have concerns with the direction of the government. Madam Chair, that's concerning.

We see it again with changes to grants and overall funding for nongovernmental agencies. We see a reduction in grants for these organizations because, once again, these organizations are typically the ones that come forward with concerns about the direction of the government, but this government is cutting them off at the knees. Really, we see the direction of this government is that they want to point fingers at anybody but themselves because they don't believe that they should take responsibility for the actions that they are taking.

Once again, when we say that there should be consultation of at least six months with these postsecondary institutions and with their faculties and with students, it is absolutely reasonable that that consultation happen before arbitrary enrolment targets are put in place by this Advanced Education minister, who has their own biases just like any of us do, who has their own ideas of where somebody should go to school or what degree they should be obtaining, which is very concerning.

As the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar mentioned, in his time as the Minister of Advanced Education we went from the most expensive province to obtain advanced education in to middle of the pack because of the tuition freeze. Now, once again, this UCP government is taking that in the opposite direction. They want us, as the Minister of Transportation spoke of, to take the handcuffs off these postsecondary institutions so that they can charge higher rates to students to obtain education.

We see this general philosophy from this UCP government. They truly seem to have something against people that are working to obtain higher levels of education. Once again, we see it from their reduction in minimum wage. We see it from tuition increases. We see it from these enrolment targets that are before us. They truly do not believe that education is the great equalizer. They truly do not believe that students should be able to choose what education they are going to be receiving.

Once again, on top of these arbitrary enrolment targets that this government is trying to put in place, they're scrapping education and tuition credits. The Minister of Transportation seems to support all of these changes. I question who this government consulted that said: we should get rid of education and tuition credits. This government scrapped the tuition freeze, making postsecondary education more unaffordable and making it harder now for students to obtain postsecondary education. This government increased interest on student loans. Really, we are seeing that this government is doing everything in their power to hide the debt that they have created from their $4.7 billion handout, a budget that just yesterday received – well, Moody's gave it a failing grade and reduced our ability to get, at the end of the day, cheaper loans.

This government once again scrapped grants for institutions, which means, as the Member for Edmonton-Rutherford mentioned, higher fees for things like parking and resident fees, which is very concerning. At the end of the day, this government is saying that they've uncuffed the hands of these postsecondary institutions, but what they've done is that they've unleashed the ability for compound levels of fees to be forced on students, not just domestic but international, which is a whole other concern about the fact that this government is going to – really, going back to the fact that we should be aiming to increase the number of people going to postsecondary and achieving degrees and diplomas and certifications, this government is actually working against that entirely through this legislation and the other pieces that we've seen around postsecondary education.

The minister has also said in the past that they plan to reduce grants by half over the next few years, which is very concerning. Once again, postsecondary institutions only have a couple of levers. One of them is receiving funding from the government, of course. So when this minister's direction is that we are going to continue reducing these grants and that if you don't hit these enrolment targets that are arbitrarily set by the minister, that could potentially mean a reduction in funding – we see this carrot-and-stick show from this government day in and day out. They're saying that if you don't meet our demands, we are going to cut your funding, Madam Chair. That's very concerning.

The fact is that this government speaks in coded language around their true motives. It's simply the fact. The Minister of Transportation is the perfect example of it. I've gone on at length about the comments that he's made, but really the fact is that what he's saying, that the government no longer wants to help these students and is going to leave it up to the free market to, at the end of the day, Madam Chair, take advantage of these students, is what is going to happen.

11:40

Now, once again I'm going back to thinking about my own mother, who obtained a degree, but it took many years, many, many years, possibly even decades to get rid of the cost of tuition, get rid of that student loan that was taken on at the time of that postsecondary education.

Once again, this minister says that we need to think about whether students want to pay more upfront so that they don't have to pay their fair share in taxes down the road. Madam Chair, that comment was absolutely absurd, to say that somebody might want to pay $20,000, $30,000 more for their tuition right now to obtain their degree so that they might not have to pay, you know, whatever it might be, $10 more a year, to help somebody else get postsecondary education. This is really one of the best contrasting ideas to show what I believe in personally compared to what they believe in. They believe that things should be paid more upfront. It's very concerning, Madam Chair, that this government thinks that it's okay for students to pay tens of thousands more over the next four years. It's very frustrating.

Madam Chair, it's safe to say that I will be supporting this amendment. At the end of the day, it's very common sense. It's straightforward. If this Advanced Education minister plans to force arbitrary enrolment targets on these institutions, it should be consulted on. It's one thing to say that there was consultation done around the idea of enrolment targets, but to say that any enrolment targets set moving forward should not be subject to consultation is absolutely absurd. It is in everyone's best interests – this government, these postsecondary institutions, and the students and faculty there – to have these consultations before putting in these enrolment targets, which may or may not be the right thing to do.

Once again I appreciate my privilege of being to speak to this legislation and this amendment. I think that everyone should take a moment to think about their own privilege when it comes to making postsecondary education more unaffordable for students into the future. I think it would do us all well to think about that.

Madam Chair, once again, thank you very much. I hope everyone will take the time to support this amendment to Bill 20. Thank you.

Mr. McIver: I just can't help but point out that near the end of the rant that we just heard from the hon. member, he compared a $20,000 to $30,000 increase in tuition to paying $10 more a year. Just so the folks watching at home understand how the NDP thinks, they're counting on people that graduate working at least 200 years, and that's without interest payments to pay it back. That's what he would have them do.

I just wanted to say that the hon. member, while he was trying to trash out what was said before, didn't put a lot of thought into what he said, and I think that that's kind of illustrative of his entire speech. I just wanted to point that out.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo.

Member Ceci: Thank you very much. It gives me great pleasure to speak to this amendment, which I hope members of this House will support, notwithstanding that the last comment from the Minister of Transportation didn't make a lot of sense. I would hope that you wouldn't support anything he says, because he doesn't make a lot of sense sometimes.

Madam Chair, I do want to say that with university tuition, postsecondary tuition, becoming quite expensive under the UCP government, you know, what we potentially will see is the Minister of Advanced Education getting involved in setting tuition caps on different faculties and those faculties raising the grade point average to get into faculties. If that happens, then we could see, with the handcuffs that the Minister of Transportation said they're taking off universities, universities jacking up the costs of tuition and limiting the number of people who will get into programs and tuition and university education becoming quite unaffordable for the greatest number of people.

We don't want that to happen, Madam Chair. What we want is for people to be able to get into postsecondary education because that's really what is the key to a better life. A university or a postsecondary education or a college education is the key to achieving the kind of sustainable, great jobs that people want. I hope the pages here take note that you need to continue on with your education; you need to go to postsecondary because that's the key to a life that you can enjoy and afford down the road. But the UCP is making it quite unaffordable for these pages and others in the near future.

Chair's Ruling
Referring to Employees of the Legislature

The Chair: Hon. member, there have been instances in this House where employees of the Legislature have been used in our debates, for or against, those types of things. It's not helpful for the tone of this House. I would ask you to refrain from doing that in the future.

Debate Continued

Member Ceci: I was just pointing out the cost of university or postsecondary education. But I do want to say that one other factor in this bill that's going to make it harder to get into university – and it relates to tuition and the amendment that we're recommending – is the change to the family benefits that is happening in Bill 20. What we'll see . . .

The Chair: Hon. member, I hesitate to interrupt you again, but we are on amendment A5.

Member Ceci: Yes.

The Chair: When we are not on amendment A5, you can speak to other parts of the bill.

Member Ceci: Okay.

The Chair: Please proceed.

Member Ceci: With regard to the expensiveness, the UCP's directions in this bill will result in fewer people getting into postsecondary education. Of course, we want to ensure that everybody has the means to get into university, and with this bill they won't.

With our amendment, which says that "after consultation of not less than 6 months with public post-secondary institutions, and their affected faculties and students," that is a much better way of gaining a more complete understanding of the negative impact that this bill will have on postsecondary institutions.

When I went through postsecondary, it was affordable because not only were there loans and grants but there was my own work in the summer. I could put that all together and get through the four years of my first degree and the three years of my second, a postgraduate degree.

The fact that it's going to be tougher and that we are moving forward quickly with regard to it in terms of Bill 20 is something that all of us should take into consideration, that should give us pause, because really, in trying to find out if there is a negative impact, the people who are the experts are the affected faculties and students. And there hasn't been a great deal of consultation. As you can see, the students aren't even included in the bill's original motion with regard to this area, that we are trying to make sure does not happen. The students really are the masters of understanding the impact on their lives with regard to the changes that Bill 20 is bringing forward, and they're not even considered, Madam Chair.

This current government has taken drastic and fast action, and it's in a shock-and-awe kind of perspective, that they're going to change as much as they can as quickly as they can, and we'll figure it out when we get to figure it out. Well, I'm saying that that is not the way that you make good public policy; the way that you make good public policy is by taking the impact of what is going on before you change things, taking the potential impact of the changes and their effect on people before you make the changes.

Now, we haven't done everything perfectly on this side; we have taken some knocks in that regard, so I guess I'm sharing this information as a person who has not done everything perfectly but is trying to change positively as I go forward. Of course, I think that our former Advanced Education minister and his argument around the presentation of and support of this amendment to Bill 20 is what I'd like to see taking place and what we hope that members on the other side will agree with.

Of course, the cost of a university education: I'll just go back to that for a second, something that – societies who have great educational systems try and make sure that their system is affordable. Now, in the United States we know, with the recent controversy there about people trying to get into specific universities and not doing things properly, that they're trying to buy their way into those universities. That's not something we ever want to see in this country, in this province. We want it to be affordable for all people who choose to go to university. Unfortunately, there's too much in this bill that makes life unaffordable for Albertans who are wanting to undertake that.

Madam Chair, I'm going to sit down, but I hope members on the other side consider this motion and support it with all their might. Thank you.

11:50

The Chair: The hon. Member for Red Deer-South.

Mr. Stephan: Thank you, Madam Chair. Before coming into the Legislature, I always was taught that you're supposed to speak less, be as concise as possible, and it's kind of a different environment sometimes, where it seems that sometimes we hear a lot and not very much.

I want to just speak against, of course, the amendment at issue here. I appreciate the spirit in which it is intended. The member opposite said that he wasn't perfect, and I heartily agree that the entire members opposite were not perfect, and Albertans had that same sentiment. But, you know, we are not perfect also.

The principle of consultation. I just want to share with the members opposite and all members in this House that, in fact, consultation in respect of advanced education is a continuous process. Indeed, this morning I had the opportunity to meet with our Advanced Education minister, central Alberta MLAs, and the president of Red Deer College to talk about how they will go forward and be innovative in terms of making sure that we deliver education in an economic, sustainable way that is focused on market outcomes. So consultation is something that has happened, is happening, and will continue to happen. As government we always seek to try and be the best that we can be.

You know, we talk about the red tape bill that we passed. In my mind, the important message underlying the red tape bill is that we are going to look for continuous improvement. We want to change the culture of government and in all areas seek to be better. Of course, that includes advanced education.

I'm speaking as well because education is something that I hold dearly personally. I'm so grateful for the opportunity that I had to receive an intentional education, and I use the word "intentional" purposefully. As we're able to provide students, the rising generation of Albertans, with opportunities where they can be intentional in the choices that they make to receive a high-quality education, they will have the opportunities to be self-reliant and seek happiness as they individually see fit.

But it's really important that we understand that the status quo is unacceptable. We know from the MacKinnon report that we are the most expensive jurisdiction in terms of educating our youth without better outcomes. Indeed, as mentioned, we have declining

enrolment. Unfortunately, I see the former Advanced Education minister sitting across the floor there, and we had the opportunity in Public Accounts to review the results of the Advanced Education ministry. Unfortunately, it really reinforces what the MacKinnon report said essentially, that we spend more. Even over the past years under the tenure of the prior government we spent more, and unfortunately our results were less.

I think one of the most concerning statistics that came out in the annual report of Advanced Education . . .

The Chair: Hon. member, I hesitate to interrupt, but according to Standing Order 4(3) the committee 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 a certain bill. The committee reports progress on the following bill: Bill 20. I wish to table all copies of all amendments considered by Committee of the Whole on this date for the official records of the Assembly.

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, please say no. So carried.

Mr. McIver: Madam Speaker, it is 3 minutes until 12. I thank all hon. members from all sides of the House for their debate today and their contribution to the business of the House, but I think we have completed as much as we can at this point. I will move that the House adjourns until 1:30 p.m. today.

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. members, before we adjourn the House today, I would like to invite all of you to a Christmas carolling, nonpartisan style, in the lobby today. If you have an instrument please bring that. Otherwise, just bring your voice. We'd be happy to have you.

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

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