



Province of Alberta

The 30th Legislature
Second Session

Alberta Hansard

Thursday afternoon, May 7, 2020

Day 19

The Honourable Nathan M. Cooper, Speaker

Legislative Assembly of Alberta
The 30th Legislature
Second Session

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Legislative Assembly of Alberta

1:30 p.m.

Thursday, May 7, 2020

[The Speaker in the chair]

The Speaker: Hon. members, please be seated. Good afternoon.

Statement by the Speaker

Members' Fifth Anniversary of Election

The Speaker: Hon. members, May 5 marked the fifth anniversary of the first election for 30 members of the 30th Legislature. In 2015 the following members were elected for the first time: the hon. Member for Airdrie-East, the hon. Member for Athabasca-Barrhead-Westlock, Bonnyville-Cold Lake-St. Paul, Calgary-Buffalo, Calgary-Fish Creek, Calgary-McCall, Calgary-Mountain View, Central Peace-Notley, Drayton Valley-Devon, Edmonton-Castle Downs, Edmonton-City Centre, Edmonton-Decore, Edmonton-Ellerslie, Edmonton-Glenora, Edmonton-Gold Bar, Edmonton-Manning, Edmonton-McClung, Edmonton-Mill Woods, Edmonton-Riverview, Edmonton-Rutherford, Edmonton-South, the hon. Member for Edmonton-West Henday, the hon. Member for Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo, the hon. Member for Lacombe-Ponoka, the Member for Lethbridge-West, the hon. Member for St. Albert, the hon. Member for Taber-Warner, the hon. Member for Chestermere-Strathmore, the hon. Member for Rimbey-Rocky Mountain House-Sundre, and the hon. Member for the outstanding constituency of Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills. If you heard your name called, I would invite you to rise and receive the warmest welcome of the Assembly.

Hon. members, I will indicate to you that the members of the LASS will be distributing the five-year service pins throughout question period or immediately, as the case may have it.

Members' Statements

Economic Relaunch Strategy

Member Loyola: Mr. Speaker, with the plan to begin relaunching our economy, it's important to acknowledge the immense responsibility our government has when implementing a strategy for all Albertans. I've heard from several constituents that are feeling anxious about the future and want to return to a state of normal. Albertans want to go back to their jobs, business owners want to reopen, and we're all looking for a sense of economic security. However, we must take an approach that is based on evidence, that incorporates broad testing as a foundational element and ensures that our health system has the capacity to address any increased incidents of infection so that Albertans are protected.

Mr. Speaker, I worry for the numerous family-owned small businesses that have to decide between running their small business or taking every step possible to protect the health of their families and employees. They want to be an active part of the economy but also want to feel safe and do their part to flatten the curve. This is why our caucus has made many calls for supports to ensure that Albertans can meet this balance. Anyone who is unable to go to work because of public health rules should be able to continue to access emergency financial supports, and the same supports should be extended to businesses as well so that any business that chooses not to reopen during the public health emergency can still access support. These are just two of the eight calls we made to supplement the economic relaunch. Albertans recognize the grave consequences that could result in defying the chief medical officer's

orders and have stepped up in inspirational ways to adapt while sacrificing so much.

It is time for the government to step up and support Albertans going back to work and be transparent on what the economic relaunch looks like. If we want Alberta's economy to be ready to rebound from this pandemic, we must ensure that all businesses and workers can weather this storm and not just a fair few.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Lacombe-Ponoka.

Shootings in Central Alberta

Mr. Orr: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Around 8:15 a.m. yesterday RCMP were notified of shots being fired in the town of Blackfalds. This situation escalated quickly and resulted in further shots being fired and a high-speed chase before RCMP were able to stop the individual on the freeway near Leduc. He lost his life. An RCMP officer and an innocent bystander were injured.

This is a tragedy. I grieve for all those caught up in this situation, for the citizens of Blackfalds, and all Albertans. When we see such harm done to the people around us and our first responders, we are all impacted.

We don't know yet what drove this individual to such desperate and destructive behaviour. I can understand the stress we have all been under. Many of us are experiencing economic crisis, physical stress, and social tension caused by a global pandemic and economic collapse. These factors may have contributed to the personal fears, angers, and desperations that drove such erratic and dangerous behaviour.

I ask everyone to dig deep and find compassion. Encourage others in these difficult times. Don't give in to the darkness. We must meet tragedy with the tenacity to care for each other.

I thank the RCMP, who courageously wear their badge. They spend days and nights protecting our communities, confronting traumas like this. They risk everything to protect us.

My thoughts and prayers are with the individuals and their families from yesterday's incident. All of us wish for a full recovery for those who are injured emotionally and physically. My condolences to the family of the young man that died. My thoughts and prayers are with you.

If you or someone you know is struggling, please reach out. Get or give support. During these difficult times please reach out to family, friends, and neighbours. Intervene in their pain. Help is available. Please be that help.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Leduc-Beaumont.

RCMP and Shootings in Central Alberta

Mr. Rutherford: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Yesterday an officer with the Royal Canadian Mounted Police was rushed to hospital after being shot in the line of duty. The incident happened just south of Leduc on QE II near highway 2A. Though the officer suffered serious injuries, I'm relieved to hear that the injuries are non life-threatening. Starting at 8:15 a.m. with a call to the RCMP in Blackfalds, this situation quickly escalated to shots being fired and the pursuit of an armed suspect. Swift action from the RCMP officers prevented further injuries to surrounding motorists and residents during this frightening scene.

As a 10-year member of the Edmonton Police Service I cannot describe the feelings that myself and the police community at large express when a colleague is involved in a dangerous situation such as this one. When one agrees to the job, you also agree to take on the risk, which at times can put you in a position of risking one's life in the defence of someone else's.

I commend all the officers involved in yesterday's tense situation for their actions and responding with diligence and determination to resolve the situation. I wish a quick recovery for the injured bystander and for the injured officer, and we hope to see you protecting our streets again soon. As time goes on, the memories and injuries, either mental or physical, may persist. I hope that all involved and those connected to those involved will take the time to continue to look out for one another and be ready to support those who are in need.

Thank you to all the RCMP officers for keeping Albertans safe.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford has a statement to make.

Northern Alberta Flooding

Mr. Feehan: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Recently the Premier made a trip to Fort McMurray in order to assess the damage created by the ice jam and the subsequent devastating flooding. The NDP called on the government to ensure that the promised disaster relief funding was provided in an expeditious manner, and we certainly hope that the residents receive that funding soon.

But it is not only Fort McMurray that experienced the flood this spring. The hamlets of Fort Vermilion and Buttertown were also subject to evacuation measures that resulted in the majority of the residents having to leave their homes. In the last few days the evacuation order has been lifted, and residents have returned to find that their homes have been severely damaged and that large sinkholes have formed, making the area around the homes dangerous to navigate.

For many residents there is no possibility of re-inhabiting their homes until significant reclamation and rebuilding has occurred. For some residents it is likely that they will never be able to return to their homes. Seventy-five per cent of the residents of the regional housing authority have been told that they must leave their homes today and will not have access until the repairs are completed. These residents are being directed to leave the community to find housing on their own in High Level and other communities. Many of the families that own their homes, some on the local authority rent-to-own scheme, did not have insurance and will lose everything that they have struggled to build for themselves.

It would appear that a disaster recovery plan must be created to help these families. Many of them are already dealing with multiple issues in their lives and are therefore quite vulnerable in the face of this disaster. The absence of a plan to provide immediate financial and housing assistance will result in significant distress for this small community. Redirecting these residents out of Fort Vermilion may lead to a sharp decline in the population, putting stress on the long-term viability of the town and its services. As a significant number of the dispossessed citizens are First Nations people, it would be important that any scheme to address the needs of the community should involve representatives of the nations. The North Peace Tribal Council is ready and willing. The time to act is now.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Brooks-Medicine Hat.

1:40 Sexual Violence Awareness Month

Ms Glasgo: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is my honour to rise in the House today in recognition of Sexual Violence Awareness Month. Sexual Violence Awareness Month occurs every year in May and is an opportunity for all Albertans to work together to end sexual violence in our province.

A recent study by the Association of Alberta Sexual Assault Services found that 1.8 million Albertans have experienced sexual violence in their lifetime. Mr. Speaker, that is 43 per cent of Alberta's population, 1 in every 3 Albertans. We all know someone who has experienced sexual violence, whether it is a family member, a co-worker, or a friend, and we know that it is vital to provide the services and supports that survivors need so that they can heal and make important decisions about how they want to proceed.

Our government has made meaningful strides to support survivors in Alberta. We have increased funding for sexual assault services by \$1.2 million and supported the creation of the Alberta one line for sexual violence. Just this morning we passed Bill 8, which protects vulnerable Albertans at risk of being trafficked and strengthens a survivor's ability to get away from physically, emotionally, and financially damaging abuse.

But there is still more to do. We know that in times of crisis such as COVID-19 rates of sexual and domestic violence increase. We know that this is a time where we need to come together as Albertans to look out for each other. Our government is committed to ensuring that support is available through our recently announced \$53 million increase in funding to support those struggling with mental health and addictions.

I want to end today, Mr. Speaker, by speaking to the survivors watching. Every member in this House has your back. Sexual violence is not a partisan issue. We will fight together to ensure that no Albertan will go through this again, we will work together to continue supporting community agencies across the province in delivering supports and services, and, most importantly, we believe you. I believe you. Together we can and will end sexual violence.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View.

COVID-19 Related Government Strategies and Abortion Rights

Ms Ganley: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. What is a life worth? In a world with as much misinformation as information, where we have come up with so many ways to talk around what we're really saying, I think it's important to recognize what conversation we're really having. When we talk about immediately reopening a plant where almost half of the workers have been infected with a disease likely to kill a certain percentage of them, that's the conversation we're having: what is a life worth?

I guess it's the philosopher in me, but I think if we can drill down through the misleading language to the actual premises that form the argument, we might change a mind, that if we expose the unstated and false premises, we may have more in common with each other than we realize, because we have these conversations more than we think. We have it when we say that it isn't worth the remaining two months of a part-time EA's salary to make sure that a student in a critical period learns how to read. We have it when the UCP members walk into this place and refer to occupational health and safety rules designed to save lives as red tape. We are measuring human lives in dollars and cents.

I am surprised that we have this conversation so much because a large portion of the members across the way believe that a clump of cells that may one day become a life is worth violating the bodily autonomy of every woman. And don't tell me it's only some women: a right that can be taken away is no right at all. I say this in the sincere hope that the members opposite who think the possibility of a life is worth so very much will stop and consider the

moments when we are measuring the value of a life in dollars and cents because we're likely to have this conversation a lot this year.

Shootings in Nova Scotia

Mr. Long: Mr. Speaker, during the night of April 18 a tragedy unfolded in the province of Nova Scotia. Heinous acts have left many families reeling in agony as their loved ones had their lives cut devastatingly short. As many know, I was born and raised in Nova Scotia. Many of my own family members live near where these horrible crimes occurred. My cousin is now sharing in the agony as she lost her brother and his wife and daughter in this senseless tragedy.

Nova Scotia is one of the least-populated provinces in Canada. It is a place where everyone feels like a friend, where everyone feels like part of the community. That is why, when the news began trickling in during the morning of Sunday, April 19, I felt such terrible grief. Mr. Speaker, I'm standing in this Chamber not only to pay tribute to the victims of this heinous crime but also to pay tribute to the courageous members of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police who responded with such determination in the face of a wily and premeditated criminal. Once first responders arrived on scene, they did not stop until the suspect was no longer a threat to their fellow Nova Scotians.

Specifically, I would like to honour Constable Heidi Stevenson and Constable Chad Morrison. Chad Morrison is recovering from the wound he received, but sadly Constable Stevenson was taken from us. Constable Stevenson was a mother of two, a wife, and is now one of the hallowed members of the RCMP who made the ultimate sacrifice for their community. Let us never take for granted what members of law enforcement put on the line to keep us safe. In remembering her and the many other victims of this unspeakable act, I believe we will remind ourselves how grateful we are that so many Canadians have the fortitude and the courage to run toward the gunfire rather than away from it. I also hope that this will remind us to hold our loved ones that much closer, especially during this pandemic.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Devon.

COVID-19 Community Response

Mr. Smith: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We bear witness to an historic global event, one that will be spoken of and analyzed for generations to come. The COVID-19 pandemic has hit Alberta hard. Our province has seen record low oil prices, businesses have had to close their doors, and social distancing measures have taken their toll on our citizens' mental health. COVID-19 has challenged us in ways we could never have imagined.

Mr. Speaker, I am a teacher by trade and at heart, and I believe all lessons are a gift. They help us to grow. This pandemic has given stiff lessons on preparedness and emergency management, but the best lesson we have been gifted is in how we come together as a community. It's been seven weeks since Alberta declared a state of public health emergency, and in that time I've seen extraordinary acts of love and kindness from Albertans, one such example being Drayton Valley's IGA, who bought out our local Girl Guides' entire stock of cookies and began selling them out of their store, with 100 per cent of the proceeds going back to the Girl Guides. It's actions like this that show the true meaning of community spirit.

Not only are businesses pitching in, but individuals of all ages are using their unique skills to help combat this pandemic. One of my

constituents, a nine-year-old named Tori, started sewing and delivering masks and scrub bags to the Drayton Valley hospital.

Alberta never ceases to amaze and inspire me. I'm proud to live among such resilient people, people who take a crisis and say: what can I do to help? For anyone feeling hopeless over where we find ourselves, I encourage you to look to our front-line health care workers, our truckers, our grocery store clerks, and our nursing home staff. I encourage you to look to our volunteers and businesses offering their services to fight this pandemic. I encourage you to hope and to find beauty in how quickly Albertans mobilized to help one another.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Fort Saskatchewan-Vegreville.

Food Allergies

Ms Armstrong-Homeniuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to rise in the House to recognize May as Food Allergy Awareness Month, a subject that affects my family along with approximately 2.6 million other Canadians, including almost 500,000 children.

A food allergy occurs when the body's immune system sees a certain food as harmful and reacts by triggering an allergic reaction. Someone can have a life-threatening allergy and not know it until they have a severe reaction. Carefully reading labels and menus, remembering to disclose your allergies, and carrying an epinephrine auto injector, or EpiPen, are routines that people like myself have to follow on a daily basis. Still mistakes can happen, and that's why public awareness is so important. People need to understand not to ignore early symptoms, to always take possible reactions seriously, and to act quickly. I do not want anyone to go through seeing their child blue and limp the way that I did when my daughter reacted to eating a peanut. That experience could have had a very different outcome if I were not already familiar with the signs of an anaphylactic reaction.

The key is that not every reaction will look the same. A person can have a different symptom each time. Most allergic reactions happen within minutes, but some can occur hours after the exposure. It is unthinkable to me that a child living in Canada today could be at risk of dying from an allergic reaction in school, and that's why I was proud to put forth and pass my private member's bill, Bill 201, which came into force on January 1, 2020. Now each school board in Alberta is mandated to have a minimum of one epinephrine auto injector on each site it operates.

Together with advocacy, education, and awareness we can improve the quality of life for Albertans with food allergies and reduce the impact of this medical condition.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

1:50

Oral Question Period

The Speaker: The Leader of Her Majesty's Official Opposition has the call.

Wage Supplement for Essential Workers

Ms Notley: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Today we heard from the federal government that it will be making \$3 billion available to provinces on a matching basis to support wage increases for essential workers. A rough calculation suggests that this would require about a hundred million dollar commitment from the province in order to maximize this benefit for Alberta workers. Will the Premier be committing today that the government will

fully fund this program and make sure that every available federal dollar is accessible to Alberta's essential workers?

The Speaker: The hon. the Premier has risen.

Mr. Kenney: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I thank the Leader of the Opposition for the thoughtful and important question. The answer is yes, the government of Alberta will be participating in the federally led wage subsidy for essential workers. It will be focused on health care aides in long-term care facilities in particular, and we will be announcing details as early as tomorrow.

The Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Ms Notley: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Indeed, that is pretty much my next question. Part of what I was going to be asking though – we know that we've already seen a \$2-an-hour wage increase, but we also know that that is significantly less than what we've seen in other provinces, in both Ontario and B.C., and we know that it's not enough to recruit the number of workers we need in long-term care. So will the Premier, then, be committing to significantly increasing the wage supplement through this program for the thousands of underpaid workers across continuing care in Alberta?

The Speaker: The hon. the Premier.

Mr. Kenney: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to correct my answer. I think the details will be forthcoming next week. There are, frankly, so many issues moving so quickly, but we are finalizing details on exactly the application of that federally supported wage subsidy.

Let me report to the House that, fortunately, I believe 94 per cent of the health care aide positions in long-term care facilities have now been filled on a permanent basis. That is to say that they have accommodated the new rule that does not permit health care aides to work in multiple facilities. So we're closing in on 100 per cent.

The Speaker: The Leader of the Opposition.

Ms Notley: Well, thank you very much. I'm not sure now if the first answer was yes or no.

But let me go on with the next one, and we'll see where we go with that. We know that the pandemic has harmed working women disproportionately. We also know that many front-line essential workers are underpaid at the best of times and that they are predominantly women. So will the Premier also be committing that child care workers, home-care workers, and disability support workers will be eligible for the additional wage supports announced by the federal government?

Mr. Kenney: Mr. Speaker, it's on those questions where decisions have yet to be made. Quite frankly, the federal government only announced a general intention to partner with provinces in this respect, I believe, last week, and there were no details forthcoming. The Minister of Labour and Immigration is working with his federal counterpart on obtaining all of those details on what would qualify, from the Alberta perspective, for the federal funding, and we'll be happy to inform the House and Albertans in the days to come about those details.

The Speaker: The hon. the Leader of the Opposition for her second set of questions.

COVID-19 Outbreaks at Meat-processing Facilities

Ms Notley: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Yesterday, as we know, we learned of the second death connected to the outbreak at Cargill. Now, if this government had followed B.C.'s lead and closed the plant after the first case on April 6, the outbreak could have been prevented. If the Premier or the government had heeded warnings from workers on April 12, this outbreak could have been prevented. Instead, workers were forced to carry on, including Arwyn Sallegue, who was diagnosed on April 23. His father was also infected, and 12 days later Armando Sallegue was dead. So will the Premier accept now that these deaths could have been prevented?

Mr. Kenney: Mr. Speaker, we could certainly track all the way back to the outset of the pandemic and say how things could have been prevented. All of these deaths perhaps could have been prevented had we taken the same measures as Taiwan and shut our borders immediately to hot spots of COVID-19. There will be time to do a full retrospective on things that went wrong at every level: internationally, nationally, and here provincially.

Mr. Speaker, I'm pleased to inform the House that some 85 per cent of the workers at the two meat-packing plants who had been detected with COVID-19 have since recovered.

The Speaker: The Leader of the Opposition.

Ms Notley: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. This morning I heard the Premier on the radio, and it sounded a lot to me like blaming the worker. Indeed, I heard him refer to workers carpooling and going to church, but the thing that he didn't mention is workers working elbow to elbow without masks or dividers for hours on end, being pressured into shift after shift even when sick, hiding vital information from workers by the employer. That wasn't referenced. This blame-the-worker attitude, in fact, is what caused the outbreak in the first place. It has to stop. Will the Premier call a public inquiry to fix this problem?

Mr. Kenney: Mr. Speaker, while the NDP is regrettably focused on politicizing the crisis and casting blame, we're focused on handling the crisis on the best advice from our public health officers. I did not say anything about going to church. I actually quoted literally – she's citing me quoting from Dr. Hinshaw, who said that, quote, when you have an outbreak in people who are working very hard, living with intertwined families working in different sectors, that virus spreads very quickly. That's what we've seen in these outbreaks. That's one of the key learnings, that the public health officers did not take measures quickly enough to deal with the spread outside of the workplace.

Ms Notley: We wouldn't have had to work on it outside of the workplace if the workplace itself had been shut down, and that's the issue. The outbreak at the Cargill plant is the largest single failure of government's responsibility to protect working people on this continent. Now, we know there's going to be an OH and S investigation, but the failure of the government to close the plant cannot be investigated by the same people who failed to close the plant. Albertans have a right to be safe at work and to know that the mistakes made at Cargill will not be repeated. Will this Premier commit to a public inquiry?

Mr. Kenney: Mr. Speaker, I can absolutely commit that there will be an exhaustive review of Alberta's entire response to the pandemic at an appropriate time, but we are not going to distract officials from the immediate imperative of limiting the spread right now by already engaging in a retrospective way when they're in the

midst of the crisis. Let me quote Dr. Hinshaw further. She said that one of the things that happened with respect to the packing plants was that we focused on the site very specifically, but it became clear that there likely had been some exposures at the site before the outbreak had been declared.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar has a question to ask.

Environmental Monitoring of the Oil Sands

Mr. Schmidt: Yesterday, in response to a simple question as to why he allowed the Alberta Energy Regulator to suspend environment rules at 16 different oil sands projects, the minister claimed that the regulator had not reduced requirements. Mr. Speaker, it's this minister's word against the regulator's, who states that that's exactly what has happened. Now there's no monitoring to protect animals like the 50 birds that died in the tailings pond late last week. Will the minister of the environment please admit his mistake to the House, reinstate the monitoring, and do something to save wildlife for a change?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Environment and Parks.

Mr. Jason Nixon: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's disappointing to see the hon. member continuing along this line of questioning, but this is typical NDP misfacts. Again I'll quote from the bulletin from the AER. They have

temporarily suspended a number of reporting requirements that affect Alberta's energy industry. This direction does not affect monitoring requirements, which must continue to be met . . .

Industry must continue to report as directed in compliance and enforcement orders. They must also continue to report emergencies, including incidents, notifications, contraventions, and releases that have or may have the potential to impact the environment or public safety.

Mr. Schmidt: Well, Mr. Speaker, given that the minister is misquoting the AER and I can direct him to where the AER has specifically suspended monitoring requirements at Imperial Oil's Kearl Lake in addition to 15 other sites, I'll try again. The Energy Regulator declined to respond to a question about whether they had even consulted First Nations who could be impacted by a reduction in monitoring, so will the minister at least confirm that consultation had been undertaken before this decision to suspend monitoring was put in place?

Mr. Jason Nixon: Mr. Speaker, again, the hon. member should refer to the AER's bulletin, which says that

While these reporting requirements have been suspended, the following exceptions apply . . .

to the reporting requirements.

- Bird protection plans for oil sands sector.

So no matter how hard he tries to cherry-pick from a release, what he's saying is not factual. Reporting requirements have been adjusted to be able to help the industry during COVID-19, but the environment is still being monitored and protected inside the province of Alberta.

2:00

Mr. Schmidt: Well, Mr. Speaker, obviously, delis are shut, but somebody is still serving some finely sliced baloney. This environmental monitoring work can be done safely. I know. I've done it myself. It's done outside, in the environment, where you can properly distance. Will the minister at least admit that his decision to shelve environmental monitoring standards has nothing to do

with safety and everything to do with helping his corporate friends at Imperial Oil?

Mr. Jason Nixon: Mr. Speaker, again, from the AER's press release notice: "During the period of temporary suspensions [on reporting requirements], parties must continue to record and retain complete documentation and make it available upon request." They must continue to monitor. They must continue to report when there are environmental problems, and they have to take their time . . . [interjections]

The Speaker: Order. You may feel that way, but you are not entitled to say that from a sitting position.

The hon. Member for Rimby-Rocky Mountain House-Sundre, the Minister of Environment and Parks, has the call, and only him.

Mr. Jason Nixon: Mr. Speaker, to be clear, the industry must continue to report as directed in compliance and with all enforcement orders. Those are the facts. We will continue to support our industry as they work through COVID-19 while protecting the environment inside this province.

The Speaker: It's now time for the hon. Member for Calgary-McCall. [interjection] Order. [interjection] Order. [interjection] Order. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar will come to order. You've had your opportunity to ask the question. It's now Calgary-McCall's opportunity, not yours.

Utility Payment Deferral

Mr. Sabir: Mr. Speaker, this government has now announced its utility deferral three times, and the minister must have hurt his shoulder patting himself on the back during his press conferences. But this bill doesn't go far enough. Deferrals won't help people in the long term. Premier, provinces like British Columbia and Ontario are providing real relief on utility bills for consumers. Why won't you do the same?

The Speaker: The hon. Associate Minister of Natural Gas and Electricity.

Mr. Nally: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. You know, if the Member for Calgary-McCall is going to wait a year to ask me a question, the least he could do is read the legislation, because there is absolutely nothing in there that precludes us from making amendments to extending the program. Listen, at the end of the day, we have both a fiduciary responsibility and a moral responsibility to Albertans, and we take that seriously.

Mr. Sabir: That was not the question, by the way.

The Calgary Chamber of commerce worries that it might take up to 18 months until the economy is fully back. Many Albertans and Alberta businesses will be hurting much past June. Will the Premier commit to providing relief on Alberta utility bills for longer than just three months, or will he force Albertans to decide between turning on the lights or paying back the interest to the government's friends and insiders?

Mr. Nally: Mr. Speaker, it's ironic that the members over there that tried to bankrupt the treasury are asking if we can do more. Of course we can. We have, as I said, a fiduciary responsibility, a moral responsibility. We will continue to monitor situations on the ground. If we need to respond, we will continue to do so, rest assured.

Mr. Sabir: Mr. Speaker, even before the pandemic electricity bills were 19 per cent above the cap that our government had put in place, and Albertans will be paying the price for this minister's self-described generosity through rate riders over the next two years. Premier, Minister, I have heard from so many Albertans about how they are struggling with their utility bills. To the minister: if you're not interested in providing real relief for Albertans through the COVID-19 crisis, which you haven't done, can you at least commit to putting the price cap back in so Albertans have some certainty?

The Speaker: The hon. the Associate Minister of Natural Gas and Electricity.

Mr. Nally: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. You know, the hon. member is asking about utility retailers and the rate rider. Well, all I can say is to point out to the entire caucus that we have the only deregulated electricity industry in the country. Perhaps if they were aware of that a couple of years ago, they wouldn't have cost Albertans \$2 billion when they – we will always put Albertans first, and we'll continue to do so. [interjections]

The Speaker: Order.

The hon. Member for Lac Ste. Anne-Parkland has the call.

Energy Industry Opposition

Mr. Getson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Yesterday the leader of the separatist Bloc Québécois attacked our energy industry, saying that he thinks that, quote, tar sands are condemned and further saying: putting any more money in that business is a very bad idea. Can the Premier perhaps inform this House and, hopefully, Mr. Blanchet how Quebecers benefit from Canadian energy?

The Speaker: I'm sure the Premier is about to make this about government policy.

Mr. Kenney: Mr. Speaker, the policy of the government of Alberta is to defend our energy industry, including from attacks from, frankly, people who are ungrateful about what our energy workers have done to spread prosperity across the country. Quebecers receive \$13 billion in equalization every year, and disproportionately that comes from the hard work of women and men in this province in Canada's largest industry, that creates half a million jobs directly and indirectly across the country, including for Quebecers, including for tens of thousands of Quebecers who have come here to enjoy opportunity in Alberta.

Mr. Getson: Given that following Mr. Blanchet's initial comments, he took an attack on Alberta to a national broadcast by the CBC and given that he dismissed the national importance of our energy industry, suggesting that western Canadians should thank Quebec for buying oil, and given that he complained about not getting a special price on oil purchased from Alberta and that Quebecers can get their oil from anywhere, can the Premier please reiterate for those listening around the country why we need more Canadian oil and gas and why it would be detrimental for Quebec to buy more oil from OPEC and Saudi Arabia?

Mr. Kenney: Mr. Speaker, the leader of the Bloc Québécois seems to be obsessed with attacking the people of Alberta for having generated an enormous amount of wealth, that we have shared willingly with our fellow Canadians and particularly with our fellow Canadians in the province of Quebec. You know, it is so discouraging to hear somebody complain that they don't get a special price. Well, I'll tell you that the government of Quebec has

received tens and tens of billions of dollars from the wealth generated by the energy sector in this province, and we will at every opportunity remind our fellow Canadians of that.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Lac Ste. Anne-Parkland.

Mr. Getson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that I know that many Quebecers disagree with Mr. Blanchet's anti oil and gas position and indeed want to help Albertans through these economic times, could the Premier please correct the misinformation from Mr. Blanchet in French so that our friends in Quebec have the full information?

Mr. Kenney: M. le Président, les Albertains sont tannés avec ces attaques, cet Alberta bashing que nous voyons de M. Blanchet. Il a dit que les Albertains envoient des insultes vers les Québécois. Au contraire, nous envoyons des dizaines de milliards de dollars dans les paiements de péréquation, et dernièrement nous avons envoyé des millions de masques, de gants, et même des ventilateurs aux Québécois, nos amis québécois.

Economic Relaunch Strategy and Hair Care Professionals

Member Irwin: Earlier today I was joined online by dozens of hairstylists and barbers who are deeply worried about returning to work in only one week's time with no help from this government to keep them and their clients safe. Hairstyling is a trade. It's regulated by the government of Alberta, and these tradespeople have a right to expect details about how to work safely and keep the public safe as well. Will the Premier publish specific guidelines for hairstylists during an ongoing pandemic within the next seven days? Yes or no?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Health has risen.

Mr. Shandro: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. The chief medical officer of health, Dr. Hinshaw, is hard at work with her office and her team to be able to consult with these businesses, to answer their questions and preparing guidelines for these folks. We know that this is complex, so we recognize the need for guidance for businesses getting ready for the relaunch. The government has provided workplace guidance for all business owners, and this guidance is applicable and relevant to hair salons, child care facilities, many other industries throughout the province. We're recommending operators review it, consider how to apply it to their facility and their businesses.

Member Irwin: Given that hairstylists and barbers admit that they're not health professionals and that many are asking now if they are to be conducting their own health assessments of clients who come through the doors, back to the Minister of Health: if someone coughs in a salon or barbershop, is the owner to call 811, call the police, or call you? Surely, there's someone who can help.

Mr. Shandro: Mr. Speaker, I just want to remind the hon. member that these relaunch dates are not mandatory. If a business feels that they need more time to ensure the safety of their patrons, the safety of their staff, of course they should take the time that they need to be prepared and have the protocols in place for cleaning and physical distancing. We're also working with industry associations to develop additional risk-mitigation strategies for barbers, for hairstylists in preparation for stage 1 of the relaunch. This approach, opening these businesses at the first stage if they want to do that, if they have the ability to do that, mirrors the relaunch strategies in other jurisdictions.

2:10

Member Irwin: Given that it's not as simple as just saying that they can choose not to go back to work, because many of them will lose out on CERB and other supports – and, listen, even if the state of Georgia has clear guidelines for these personal care workers, you know, to trim a beard, you have to get up really close and personal. To any of the gents on the other side of the aisle: have you tried to trim your own beard while wearing a mask? How exactly does that work?

Mr. Shandro: Well, I'm not sure the question was for me. I think it was to other members who have facial hair in this Chamber.

Mr. Speaker, look, again, Dr. Hinshaw and her staff are working hard to be able to answer these questions from various industries, including the one that the hon. member is asking about. I'm looking forward to us being able to continue to work with many different industries as we prepare Albertans for our relaunch strategy.

The Speaker: Perhaps the hon. Minister of Infrastructure, with that smart new mustache, could have taken the question.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie has the call.

Economic Relaunch Strategy and Small Business

Member Loyola: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Through great personal sacrifice and financial uncertainty many small businesses closed their doors to help stop the spread of COVID-19, and while small businesses burn through their savings and credit, this government chose not to provide them any support for months until the federal government partnered with this government to provide the Canadian emergency rent relief program. Will the government step up and provide support for Alberta small businesses able to reopen and not continue to rely on the federal government to support our Alberta businesses?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Economic Development, Trade and Tourism.

Ms Fir: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Our government has implemented billions of dollars of supports for job creators and small businesses, ranging from small commercial utility deferrals, deferment of corporate tax, paying 50 per cent of WCB premiums, and many others. As Dr. Hinshaw has stated, there is a crossministerial approach to the development of sector-specific relaunch guidelines in addition to the general business guidelines that are already posted.

The Speaker: The Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Member Loyola: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that many small businesses are preparing to potentially reopen as early as May 14 and that owners are scrambling for answers on how to operate safely and given that this government is not providing enough information for these businesses on how to protect themselves and their customers, even causing the mayor of Calgary to encourage small businesses not to open if they do not feel that they can operate safely, will this government commit to small-business owners and their employees that if they choose not to reopen, they will still be able to access government supports that are available now and any that are rolled out in the future?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Economic Development, Trade and Tourism.

Ms Fir: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As has been mentioned numerous times, our government is continuing to review the situation on a regular basis, but protecting the health and safety of Albertans while they get back to work will always be job number one. Albertans have shown that they will adhere to public health guidelines, and we trust them to be able to continue to do so as businesses reopen. We are expecting to have guidelines for each sector publicly available very soon, and we are ensuring that we can provide effective guidelines in consultation with industry and business owners.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Member Loyola: Thank you. Given that many small businesses are struggling for capital and given that these changes will include construction of Plexiglass screens, increased stock of cleaning and sanitizing products, and necessary PPE for their staff and given that the added costs of these changes to businesses that have already been hit hard by COVID-19 can be a barrier for them to operate safely or even to reopen at all, will this government take action and finally support Alberta small businesses by promising to use our proposal and create a provincial grant program that will assist businesses with procuring appropriate PPE?

The Speaker: The minister.

Ms Fir: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. You know, it's interesting to me and a bit confusing that the members opposite are suddenly feigning support for Alberta businesses and Alberta job creators. The members on this side of the bench have always supported businesses. Some of the first bills we introduced supported businesses. The best thing that we can do to help small businesses is to help them open safely, following the guidelines of the chief medical officer and following the sector-specific industry guidelines we will be releasing within days.

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

Rural Health Care and Physician Compensation

Mr. Reid: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On Friday, April 24, the Minister of Health announced a number of changes to benefit rural physicians practising in communities like Pincher Creek, Crowsnest Pass, and High River. These changes were aimed at increasing the viability and sustainability of rural medicine around our province and responded directly to the requests of many of my local doctors for additional supports. Can the minister elaborate on these changes and explain why he chose to change these programs and not others?

The Speaker: The Minister of Health.

Mr. Shandro: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Rural recruitment and retention is a long-standing issue not just here in Alberta but across the country. I was pleased on the 24th to announce a number of changes that make Alberta's incentives for rural physicians the most generous in Canada, including removing the \$60,000 cap on the rural, remote, northern program; exempting our rural physicians from overhead policy; and freezing the medical liability insurance premiums that rural physicians and all family physicians pay at \$1,000. I want to thank my rural caucus colleagues who have been meeting with and listening to their constituents over the last few months.

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

Mr. Reid: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the minister for the answer. Given that there are real concerns around the future sustainability of high-quality rural health care and given that physicians have reached out to both my office and to yours in order to propose meaningful solutions going forward and given that the AMA has had every opportunity to propose meaningful changes as well, can the Minister of Health explain what physicians and the AMA put forward that led him to make the changes announced a couple of weeks ago?

The Speaker: The Minister of Health.

Mr. Shandro: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We've heard that some of the changes had an adverse effect on rural physicians, and that's why we announced new incentives to help improve access in rural Alberta. The department officials in the ministry and I continue to meet with the AMA. I'm open to any proposal that will support physicians and patients within our overall priority of holding spending at \$5.4 billion, the highest level per capita in the country and the highest level in the history of this province. We're going to keep moving forward, including developing new ways of paying doctors to give them more choices to decide what's best for them and their patients.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Reid: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that extensive consultation has taken place with physicians and given that as a result of the meaningful consultation, changes have been introduced to further support rural health care and given that some doctors still don't see this as enough for them to return to serving their local hospitals, can the Minister of Health explain what alternative funding models are available for physicians that feel that these changes don't meet their needs?

The Speaker: The minister.

Mr. Shandro: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In addition to our rural incentives, we've also contracted internationally recognized clinical researcher Dr. Lee Green from the U of A to provide advice to us on how to modernize alternative compensation models. Dr. Green is going to conduct a workshop and provide a summary paper with recommendations on the design and the implementation for those alternative relationship plans, and I look forward to hearing from Dr. Green on how we can further enhance alternative funding approaches to improve primary health care in this province.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-City Centre.

Mr. Shepherd: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to hear that the minister is finally in a mood to listen because yesterday nine doctors in Taber published an opinion piece in their local newspaper and wrote that despite this minister trying to clean up a small amount of the mess he made, rural health care remains "on the verge of collapse." Indeed, of his botched efforts they said that it was "akin to a bank robber returning a portion of the money he has stolen and then calling it a charitable donation to the bank." To the Member for Calgary-Acadia: what does it say about the policies you've put forward that rural Alberta doctors are left calling you a thief?

The Speaker: I would caution the member for doing indirectly what he cannot do directly. He's been around for five years now. He knows exactly what the rules are.

The Minister of Health.

Mr. Shandro: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I was very proud to be able to work with my colleagues in our rural caucuses and to

listen to rural physicians, to be able to come up with an action plan, to be able to improve access to primary health care in rural Alberta, to be able to help us address the retention and recruitment issues that are long-standing issues that have been facing our province as well as other jurisdictions throughout Canada, something, quite frankly, that the NDP failed to be able to do and failed to address when they were in government for four years.

The Speaker: The Member for Edmonton-City Centre.

Mr. Shepherd: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Now, given that these doctors also noted that their colleagues in Pincher Creek and Westlock decided to resign from their hospitals after this member's attempt to clean up some of the mess he made and given that doctors in Stettler, Sundre, Rocky Mountain House, Rimbey, Canmore, Three Hills, Bragg Creek, Drayton Valley, Cold Lake, and Lacombe have also announced plans to leave their local hospitals, close their practices, or leave Alberta altogether, is there anyone on that side of the House who can explain to the Member for Calgary-Acadia that he's creating a crisis that continues to get worse?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Health.

2:20

Mr. Shandro: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd reiterate for the hon. member that our physician compensation is at \$5.4 billion, the highest per capita in the country. Especially with the announcement that we made on April 24 to remove the cap on the rural northern program as well as increasing the on-call rates from \$11 to between \$20 and \$23 for our rural physicians, freezing the medical liability rates, our physicians in rural Alberta are the most generously paid now in the country. I'm happy to make sure that that's the case so that we're addressing access issues in rural Alberta.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-City Centre.

Mr. Shepherd: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Now, given that these doctors in Taber wrote, "There are dozens, if not hundreds more rural physicians who feel the same way," what is that member's plan for all of those communities' emergency departments? It is challenging enough to recruit one rural family position; just ask a community like Milk River. Given that this is from the Taber Clinic, a clinic that this member has praised and held up as a model for health care in the province, can this member or any member on that side of the House provide a single physician that will stand with them and say they support what this member has done to health care in rural areas?

The Speaker: The Minister of Health.

Mr. Shandro: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My rural colleagues, by listening to, by meeting with their constituents, meeting with the physicians in their communities, helped us, quite frankly, to develop the action plan that we announced on the 24th. I was very happy to be able to work with them, listening to the physicians in their communities so that we can start to address the retention and recruitment issues in rural Alberta so that we can continue to ensure that there is access to primary care in our rural communities.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-North West.

Postsecondary Education Funding

Mr. Eggen: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Alberta's postsecondary institutions are facing unprecedented challenges, yet this minister stubbornly continues with his plan to sow even further chaos in our

postsecondary education system. The University of Lethbridge has lost both of their hockey teams, the University of Alberta has shut the doors on their business school's library, and popular programs at Augustana college and Red Deer College have been cut. Will this minister stop with the cuts to our colleges and universities in the middle of a COVID-19 pandemic?

Mr. Jason Nixon: Mr. Speaker, I'm proud of our minister of postsecondary, who's actually worked tremendously hard over the last year in partnership with postsecondaries all across the province and continues to even in the COVID-19 pandemic, making sure that we find a way forward for our postsecondary institutions. What is shocking, though, is to see members like that continue to play partisan politics during the COVID-19 pandemic, but as you know and I know, that's the NDP's way.

Mr. Eggen: Oh, really, Mr. Speaker?

I mean, given that postsecondary institutions – universities, colleges, trade schools – should be central to our province's economic recovery and given that all of the government's presumptions about postsecondary education have flown out the window with this pandemic and a very difficult economic situation and given that it would require the government to reverse their plans to cut our colleges and universities, when will this minister and this government commit to cancelling the disaster that a performance-based funding model will be for our province?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Education is rising.

Member LaGrange: Mr. Speaker, thank you for the question. On behalf of the Minister of Advanced Education, I know that he is working tremendously hard to continue to support postsecondaries. He is working in collaboration with all the postsecondaries to ensure that they have the resources that they need to provide appropriate education.

Thank you.

Mr. Eggen: Well, that's very interesting, Mr. Speaker, because given that the impact of COVID-19 is profound on postsecondary institutions and affects nearly every aspect of an institution's function and given that we need all hands on deck right now – so far we've seen about 2,300 staff being cut already across the province in our colleges and universities with many more to come – will the minister commit at the very least to give short-term funding to these institutions to hire back instructors, janitors, library staff, and administrative officials so that we can get our colleges and universities back on track?

The Speaker: The Minister of Education has risen.

Member LaGrange: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We know this is an extremely stressful time for everyone, and the Minister of Advanced Education has been working closely with postsecondary institutions to ensure the health and safety of our campus communities. We are continually working with postsecondary institutions to find solutions, identify supports that may be required to work through the challenges that are presented through COVID-19. Postsecondary institutions continue to deliver courses and have over the progression of this pandemic. Students will continue to have access to educational supports and course delivery albeit in a different format than pre-pandemic.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Peace River.

School Bus Safety

Mr. Williams: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. If you drive north of the Legislature about seven hours, past the town of Manning, you will find yourself on provincial highway 35, pushing a few kilometres under the speed limit as the farmland turns into forest. Heather Pawluski is a resident with a young family who lives on highway 35. Ever since her boys started school, her children have had to cross highway 35 twice a day as trucks and commuters burn by, ignoring the flashing stop signs affixed to the side of the school bus, putting her children at risk as they try to catch the bus. To the minister of transport: what can be done to make drivers aware that they are putting her children's lives at risk?

The Speaker: The Minister of Transportation.

Mr. McIver: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would say that education and enforcement are both important elements of keeping kids safe. Safety, of course, at Transportation is our top priority. What's interesting is that studies have shown that kids on school buses are at most danger when they're outside of the bus. So one of the things that I would say that parents need to teach kids is to not trust that drivers will do the right thing when they're outside of the bus because some of them won't, and the results can be terrible.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Peace River.

Mr. Williams: Thank you, Mr. Speaker and through you to the minister for the answer and understanding that families are the most important priority for this government.

Given that Alberta has over 226,000 kilometres of highway and roads and over 2,500 schools, you can imagine that this mother is not alone in her concern within rural Alberta. To the minister: what fines or other punishment does Alberta law set out for those drivers who carelessly risk the lives of our children?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Transportation.

Mr. McIver: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. The penalty for failing to stop for a school bus with the flashing red lights on is one of the strictest ones we have for traffic in Alberta. It's \$543 plus six demerit points. You get two of those, and you're going for an appointment and turning in your driver's licence. So we take it seriously, and that's a good thing, but it doesn't help if a kid is hurt. If a kid is killed, it doesn't help. While these penalties are great, we still need to educate our children to not trust that the drivers will do the right thing.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Williams: Thank you again, Mr. Speaker and to the minister for his answer. But given that other provinces like P.E.I. and Ontario have abandoned a photoradar tax grab and instead focused on policies that make a direct impact on keeping our children safe, given that the Ford government in Ontario has increased fines upwards of \$2,000 for a first offence compared to \$500 or so here and \$4,000 for a second offence and the threat of jail time after that, to the minister: what future plans does our province and this government have to ensure the safety of our children who are simply trying to catch the school bus?

The Speaker: The minister.

Mr. McIver: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like the hon. member to know that I and all the other transportation ministers from every other province and territory in Canada along with the federal

Transport minister are working together on a report on school bus safety. It should be out within the next year, and at that point we will take a look at that both with my colleagues and Alberta as a separate place and see if there are improvements that we should be making based on what will then be, we hope, the best and most recent research that will be available.

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

COVID-19 and Child Care

Ms Pancholi: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Yesterday the Minister of Children's Services finally did the absolute least she could do and announced financial supports for child care. These are supports we've been calling for since mid-March, but more questions remain than are answered. Before child care centres can make an informed decision about reopening and before parents can decide whether it's safe to send their children back, clear health and safety rules need to be communicated and provided, something that has yet to happen with only seven days left before centres are scheduled to potentially reopen. To the Minister of Children's Services: how do you expect Albertans to send their children back to child care in one week when you've provided no concrete information?

Ms Schulz: Mr. Speaker, as I'm sure the member opposite can appreciate, we very much respect the advice and guidance we've been receiving from Dr. Hinshaw, the chief medical officer of health, and we are working with her office to determine what the protocols will be for child care centres to reopen. We have communicated with centres that this will largely be similar to what was in place for essential services child care. That information is already made public, and we will be sharing the additional protocols, I'm hoping, tomorrow and having our fifth town hall to walk centres through these very important guidelines.

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

Ms Pancholi: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's one week away.

Given that the minister has suggested that child care centres will reopen at limited capacity, although we still don't know what those numbers are, and given that when centres reopened for essential workers, they were provided \$41 per day for unfilled spots so they could afford to open with limited numbers and given that centres will likely have low enrolment when they reopen because parents do not have the information they need to confidently send their kids back to child care, will the minister commit to providing \$41 per day to all child care centres for unfilled spaces so they can viably and sustainably reopen?

2:30

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Children's Services.

Ms Schulz: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am glad that we were able to provide this sector-specific support to ensure that parents have safe, affordable options for their children as soon as we are able to start relaunching our economy. The member opposite asked us to redirect this funding to child care centres. Centres asked us to redirect this funding. That is exactly what we did. However, with the member opposite it's moving goalposts, and the answer she's always looking for is: more, more, more.

Here is what our child care centres had to say: it's been very encouraging to work in collaboration with the Minister of Children's Services to provide support to owners and operators during this trying time. We look forward to seeing . . .

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

Ms Pancholi: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's Albertans who are seeking more to support their families and their children.

Given that an already difficult time for the child care sector has been made much worse by a government that has ignored their pleas for assistance and given that Children's Services has budgeted at least \$25 million per month for child care but is only now providing \$17 million over three months to over 2,800 child care providers and given that a strong economy will require a thriving child care sector, which means this minister needs to provide more support as soon as possible – yes, more – will the Minister of Children's Services admit that she's doing the absolute bare minimum she can and has no long-term plans for the sustainability of our . . .

The Speaker: Hon. member, even though your preamble might be important to you, it still counts as a preamble and isn't allowed.

The hon. Minister of Children's Services.

Ms Schulz: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I think it's irresponsible to cherry-pick the facts, so I'd like to provide the rest of the picture here. The funding we're providing is to support roughly 25 per cent of the costs that other programs announced in recent weeks don't quite cover. This is what we heard from child care centres. Both private and not-for-profit child care centres are eligible for wage support up to 75 per cent, interest-free loans of up to \$40,000, \$10,000 of which does not have to be repaid, GST and utility deferrals, commercial rent assistance relief covering up to 75 per cent of rent payments, deferral of education property tax. We are doing the . . .

COVID-19 and Care Facility Family Visiting

Ms Ganley: Bethany, Calgary, is home to over 400 seniors. Understandably, their families are incredibly eager to see them. However, Friday's announcement that visitation would be allowed was provided with no notice and very little guidance. This facility has multiple levels of care housed in multiple buildings and is over eight storeys. The facility is old and difficult to navigate, and in order to facilitate outdoor visitation they would require significant additional personnel to help residents through the building. When will this government provide seniors, families, and care homes with guidance on how visitation is meant to be accommodated?

Mr. Shandro: Well, Mr. Speaker, it's the advice and the guidance of the public health officials, including Dr. Deena Hinshaw, the chief medical officer of health. She and her office are working with the other medical officers of health throughout the province in the five zones for them to be able to work with the 30 providers throughout the province who are providing care to these patients. I think it's unfortunate the NDP want to continue to politicize COVID and the response and provide misinformation. I'm very proud of the work that our public health officials have done so far in the response and will continue to do going forward in helping patients in the province.

Ms Ganley: Families are asking for answers.

Given that care homes have been provided with a temporary advance on their budget to cover the costs of PPE and additional staff hours required to manage care and other costs and given that visitation, which is important, will require still more PPE and additional staff time and given that these care providers have been provided with no information on who will ultimately bear these additional costs, can the minister please provide residents and staff with some assurance that they will receive additional funding and won't be expected to cut care later to pay for safety now?

The Speaker: The Minister of Health.

Mr. Shandro: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I can make that assurance. We are working with the industry to be able to get their feedback, first for us to hear from them what their cost pressures are, so then we can work with them to be able to provide them with some kind of support. We've provided them with some interim support, and we made a note to them that it is interim, and we're working with the industry for them to be able to help us understand how we can help them.

Ms Ganley: Thank you for the answer.

Given that care homes are working incredibly hard to facilitate visitation and fill in critical details of how that will be accommodated safely with very little guidance and given that Bethany, Calgary, currently has COVID-positive residents and is therefore considered an outbreak site, but given that the families are extremely eager to see their loved ones, can the government tell us whether visitation is permitted at outbreak sites and how the government intends to manage that risk?

The Speaker: The Minister of Health.

Mr. Shandro: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. These decisions are not our decisions as a government. These are the recommendations and the orders of Dr. Deena Hinshaw, the chief medical officer of health. She and her office as well as the medical officers of health throughout the five zones are working with these facilities for them to be able to give that information both to the staff, to the folks who are operating the facilities, as well as to the patients and to the family members as well.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Lacombe-Ponoka.

Mental Health and Addiction Services

Mr. Orr: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Our province is experiencing hardship like none other in recent history. Many Albertans are facing economic, social, and personal hardships due to COVID-19. The impacts of addiction and mental health issues are being felt more now than ever before. We've announced additional funding for mental health and addiction treatments during COVID-19. To the Associate Minister of Mental Health and Addictions: is this government prepared to continue providing these essential services at each stage of the relaunch strategy?

The Speaker: The hon. associate minister of mental health.

Mr. Luan: Thank you, Mr. Speaker and to the member for the great question. Our response supports both immediate and long-term needs of Albertans. Our impressive \$53 million response is the most comprehensive one in Canada. In fact, it is more than all the provinces combined. We're leading the country in supporting mental health and addiction recovery.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Lacombe-Ponoka.

Mr. Orr: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you, Minister, for the answer. Given that this week is Mental Health Week and given that during this pandemic accessing certain mental health resources must be done with respect to social distancing practices and public health orders and given that some individuals may be seeking out these resources for the first time, to the same minister: what is being done to ensure that Albertans are aware of the resources and how to access them while following public health guidelines?

The Speaker: The associate minister of mental health.

Mr. Luan: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Our response has been designed so that all of the services provided will be in full compliance with the public health orders. Albertans can call or text or access online support 24/7. Our commitment to Albertans is: help is here for you no matter where you are or when you need it. For the full list of resources, you can visit alberta.ca/mentalhealth.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Orr: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Finally, given that the government has invested \$53 million to provide greater access to mental health and addiction supports during this difficult time and given that this support is intended to meet the increased needs of Albertans during the pandemic, to the minister: what is being done to measure the reach and effectiveness of this funding?

The Speaker: The associate minister.

Mr. Luan: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. All the agencies will receive funding as part of this initiative. They will be required to report not only how many Albertans will benefit from it but how their lives will be different as a result of this service. This will allow our government to know the scope and the depth of the impact this will produce. We are focused on high-quality services delivered to Albertans effectively and efficiently.

Home Education and School Re-entry Plan

Mr. Walker: Mr. Speaker, we are currently living in unprecedented times. COVID-19 has brought many changes, and that includes how our children's education is delivered. Ninety-one per cent of public, separate, francophone, and charter schools are offering online learning. However, when these changes were first announced, many families did not own the necessary electronic devices for their children to be able to complete their school work at home. To the Minister of Education: what has been your response for those students who did not have access to a device to complete their school work from home?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Education.

Member LaGrange: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you for the question. While 91 per cent of our school authorities are offering online learning, it is important to note that almost 50 per cent are providing paperwork for their students as well. Additionally, school authorities and the government have provided approximately 60,000 devices to students across Alberta, and the Métis Nation of Alberta in partnership with Rupertsland Institute have provided 2,200 devices to Métis students. It is our expectation that every student, regardless of their socioeconomic status or geography, continues to learn.

2:40

Mr. Walker: Thank you, Minister. Given that we have begun our relaunch strategy and existing COVID-19 restrictions are beginning to be lifted and given that in stage 1 daycares and out of school care centres are set to reopen with occupancy limits, can the minister explain why K to 12 learning will remain teacher-directed, at-home learning for the remainder of the current school year and what options are being considered for the school year ahead?

The Speaker: The Minister of Education.

Member LaGrange: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We are following the expert advice of Dr. Deena Hinshaw, Alberta's chief medical officer of health. When Dr. Hinshaw was first asked about the possibility of school closures, she stated that if this action was taken, it would likely be until September. This decision was made to ensure the safety and the well-being of all our staff and our students, and we will continue to work closely with Dr. Hinshaw's office as we develop our re-entry plan.

Thank you.

Mr. Walker: Thank you, Minister. Given that the role parents are playing in their children's education is an unfamiliar situation for many and given that many parents are finding it challenging to know what to do and where to find supports during at-home learning and given that parents are looking for guidance from not only their teachers but from our government, can the minister advise what supports are available for parents to access while they continue to complete at-home learning?

The Speaker: The minister.

Member LaGrange: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As a mother of seven I want to extend my deepest appreciation to parents across our province who are working to support their children's education. We have instituted a helpline that parents can call, and Alberta Education staff can provide answers to any questions they have. It can be reached at 780.422.6548. Additionally, there are more than 4,000 curriculum resources available at learnalberta.ca to help parents as they continue to support their children. I would encourage every parent to work with their teachers and their school boards and to reach out to our helpline if they have any further questions.

The Speaker: Hon. members, in 30 seconds or less we will return to presenting reports and petitions.

Tabling Returns and Reports

The Speaker: Hon. members, are there any tablings? I see the hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora has risen.

Ms Hoffman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's my honour to rise and table a document. This is a very serious document about the fatality of the second person in connection to Cargill. It was referred to in debate yesterday by my colleague the Member for Edmonton-McClung and specifically speaks about Armando, who passed away.

The Speaker: Are there other tablings?

I have a tabling if there are no others. The six requisite copies of a memo from my office dated May 7, 2020, to all members with an abbreviated, revised, projected sitting day calendar, May 6, 7, 8. I'm sure you've all read it with bated breath.

Hon. members, we are at Ordres du jour.

Orders of the Day

Government Bills and Orders

Second Reading

Bill 14

Utility Payment Deferral Program Act

The Speaker: The hon. the Associate Minister of Natural Gas and Electricity.

Mr. Nally: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to move second reading of Bill 14, the Utility Payment Deferral Program Act.

On March 18 our government announced a series of support measures to help Albertans weather the financial storm caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. One of those measures was the utility payment deferral program, which provides critical financial relief to eligible Albertans by allowing them to defer their electricity and natural gas utility payments until June 18 of this year. The program is intended to assist Albertans who are experiencing financial hardship as a direct result of COVID-19 such as those who've lost their jobs or who had to stay at home to take care of ill family members. The deferral program permits residential, farm, and small commercial electricity and natural gas consumers to defer their utility bills provided they consume under the levels outlined in the legislation.

We've made it simple for Albertans in need of these supports to access them. All customers need to do is contact their utility service provider to defer their electricity and natural gas bills during the program period of March 18 to June 18. We've also committed that no Albertans will have their electricity or natural gas cut off or limited during this deferral period, regardless of their financial standing with the utility provider, because our priority as a government, particularly at times like this, is to ensure that Albertans are in a position to take care of themselves and their families instead of having to worry about if they can pay their bills.

While this program is designed to support Alberta households, it is our responsibility as a government to ensure that when we ask utility service providers to step up and support their fellow Albertans, these providers are able to do so effectively. We came to our utility providers in the midst of a global pandemic and asked them to commit to keeping the lights on for all Albertans. Because of this, it is our responsibility as a government to temporarily support our providers financially if it's needed. Alberta's utility providers rely on consumer payments to provide these essential services. This is why Bill 14 is so crucial. It will ensure that utility service providers can maintain access to the cash flow, if required, to continue keeping the lights on for Albertans during these uncertain times. Introducing this legislation is the best way to guarantee the utility payment deferral program is a success. It will allow Albertans who are in need of financial supports to get them and provide our utility service providers with support, if needed, to fulfill the program's objectives.

The Utility Payment Deferral Program Act also details the program's eligibility terms and conditions and repayment terms for both natural gas and electricity customers because, to be clear, this is a payment deferral, not a holiday. Customers will have 12 months to repay their deferred utility bills after the deferral period ends on June 18, giving them until June of next year to complete their payments. The legislation also ensures that utility service providers will have access to funding to maintain operations throughout the deferral period. For each type of utility service provider, whether electricity or natural gas, the act details how funds will flow and authorizes the program's associated loan payments. The legislation also provides the Alberta Utilities Commission, or the AUC, with the authority to provide program oversight, ensuring that it operates as intended.

[Mr. Milliken in the chair]

The legislation is broken into three parts. The details for electricity service providers are covered in part 1. Natural gas service providers are covered in part 2. The third part of the act outlines the role of the AUC. Parts 1 and 2 include detailed information on program eligibility, including terms and conditions

for repayment for both electricity and natural gas respectively. This establishes the utility service providers that are required to implement the utility payment deferral program and which customers are eligible to participate in the program and have their payments deferred. Additionally, as I've outlined, each part contains provisions that explicitly prohibit electricity and gas service providers from disconnecting customers during the period covered by the deferral program.

As for repayment, the legislation states that customers are required to pay back their total deferred amount by June 18, 2021. Repayment can occur either through equal monthly installments or through an alternative repayment plan provided both the retailer and the customer are in agreement and as long as full repayment occurs by the stated date of June 18, 2021.

There are three mechanisms in this legislation that enable retailers to access financing. First, on the electricity front, the legislation will allow the Balancing Pool to provide financing for some regulated retailers, competitive retailers, rural electrification associations, and municipal utilities. Second, it allows regulated retailers to defer all electricity charges on a customer's bill except for transmission charges. These will be deferred by the Alberta Electric System Operator. Third, on the natural gas side, government will provide financing for some regulated retailers, competitive retailers, gas co-ops, and municipal gas utilities. Bill 14 also establishes the funding and loan application process to ensure that deferred payments and subsequent reporting requirements are appropriately covered.

2:50

The third part of the Utility Payment Deferral Program Act defines the powers of the AUC, allowing the commission to perform specific duties related to the deferral program. It empowers the AUC to audit and review the records of these utility service providers to ensure their submissions are in alignment with the legislation. The bill also gives the AUC authority over specific aspects of the deferral program, including establishing timelines for the approval and repayment process to utility service providers.

Safe and reliable electricity is critical to Alberta's COVID-19 pandemic response, and the Utility Payment Deferral Program Act will ensure that Albertans who have been directly and financially impacted by COVID-19 are supported and that our province's utility retailers are well positioned to continue providing reliable and affordable electricity to Albertans. With the program already under way since March 18, it is vital that we move forward on this legislation expeditiously. It is my hope that all members of this House support me in moving forward with Bill 14.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

Do I see any hon. members looking to join debate? I see the hon. Leader of the Official Opposition.

Ms Notley: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure to rise to speak to this matter at second reading. There are a number of critical and important issues that need to be addressed through the introduction of this bill, so I'm pleased to have the opportunity to begin discussion on that.

Let me start, of course, by saying that I think – jeez, it seems like such a long time ago, but I don't know. Maybe it was just four or five weeks ago. I can't remember exactly. There was actually a discussion on the radio today about how our sense of time has changed a little bit over the last five or six weeks. Nonetheless, when this crisis began looming and we understood what was going to be happening to people's ability to access their income, we

quickly called on the government to ensure that people's utilities would not be cut off if they lost income as a result of having to leave work.

That was a good thing. We'd seen that kind of action taken in the past as well in previous situations where bans on disconnecting utilities had been put in place without legislation, actually. It just was done, and it's not an uncommon practice. Nonetheless, it did happen, and that was a good thing because, of course, Albertans needed to make sure, particularly in the cold days of winter, that they didn't find themselves without heat or electricity. It was good that we were ultimately able to do that. As I said, it didn't actually require legislation. It certainly didn't require legislation in the past, and we see that in practice that ban has already been in place.

That being said, what we have here as well, though, of course, is a plan to defer people's obligation to pay their utilities over a period of time. That, to me, is a part of the solution; it is not, however, the whole solution. One of the concerns that we have with this bill, which I'll get into in a moment, is the fact that we need to be looking at the whole solution.

That being said, it was certainly good that we were able to see that kind of outcome for Albertans across the province, small businesses, all the people who needed to be protected from having their utilities cut off. That happened. Certainly, those people who currently are not receiving income: we know that you can't get blood from a stone, so they need to be able to legally defer their payments without incurring significant extra costs. I will say that that is also a good thing about this bill, that not only are they deferring, but there is also a ban on late fees from utility companies. That's also a good piece of this bill. Yeah. There you go. Some good things in it.

The concern we have is that there are other things that happen in the bill that are more problematic and also that the bill, as the Member for Calgary-McCall said earlier in question period today, doesn't go far enough to support Albertans, so I'm going to spend a bit of time walking through some of our concerns about the bill in all of those regards. Let me start by just doing a high-level rundown of the areas that we are troubled by or have concerns or questions about, and then we'll talk about them in a bit more detail. My hope, certainly, is that we can have the kind of discussion where maybe some of the amendments that we propose, which we will be proposing will be considered by this government in the best interests of all Albertans.

Obviously, as I said, the first thing is that what this whole bill represents is a loan to Albertans. It does not amount to a grant or a form of relief. It is simply a deferral of payment obligations, and that is, to us, a concern. I'll talk more about that in a bit, but, I mean, that's probably the single biggest problem here. That's not what Albertans are looking for. We have heard over and over and over again – and I'm sure members opposite have as well – that pushing their payment obligations, kicking that can down the road doesn't help a lot of people. It doesn't help their balance sheet, it doesn't help their access to credit if they're in business, and it certainly doesn't help their financial sense of well-being if we're talking about residential customers and individual family budgets.

The second thing about the bill that we're concerned about is the length of time around which the deferral takes place. It's basically only three months: April, May, and June. That's very clear in the legislation. The minister tried to suggest to the Member for Calgary-McCall that he hadn't read the legislation, and in fact he had. To be clear, that's very clearly set out in the legislation. There is no place in the legislation that allows for flexibility there, so that is a concern. Associated with that is the hard period within which the additional costs need to be paid back. Again, there's not room for flexibility there, so that is also a concern.

The next areas that we are a little troubled by, which are sort of combined, are the areas that talk about the potential levels of interest that the utility provider can charge customers. Clearly, they can charge interest to customers – that’s different than a late fee – and at the same time, while charging interest, they are able to borrow from the government of Alberta, either directly or through the Balancing Pool, the money that they are not receiving from customers, and they can borrow that interest-free. You don’t have to be a massively skilled accountant to see that they are actually getting a bump through all of this, and I’m just not entirely sure that of all the players in Alberta who are struggling with the economy right now, you know, ATCO and Enmax and EPCOR necessarily should be number one on our priority list of groups that are getting financial benefits from taxpayers. That is a concern that we have.

The additional thing that we have a concern about is the use of rate riders to essentially collectivize or socialize the risk of default to consumers and households and small businesses. Again, if you have a significant, you know, default on the payback, certainly the government of Alberta is not going to cover it; it’s going to be shared amongst the very people who we’ve already identified are struggling. So to me, again, I’m not sure why only citizens are carrying the risk of default and not, you know, other elements of government that have a better ability to carry that risk or even the utilities themselves carrying part of that risk.

3:00

Then, finally, the thing that we are concerned about is the profound absence of public reporting and overall transparency associated with this piece of legislation. It appears to go to quite some lengths to avoid having to report publicly about how this program operates. Who wins, who loses, who accesses it, who gets how much interest, who defaults: none of that information is laid out. Indeed where it’s the government that is backstopping the deferral to the service providers with the natural gas sector, we’ve gone so far as to exempt the government from the typical transparency and reporting requirements that otherwise would be required through the Financial Administration Act, that is a piece of legislation that Albertans rely on to keep their government honest.

Let me start there, and then I’ll work backwards. With respect to the transparency not only would we reverse the exemption from having to report publicly to Albertans about how this loan and deferral and potential default program works, we would actually ask for more transparency. In particular, what we want to know is what the breakdown is between categories because we’ve got a number of different categories of customer who might be pursuing the opportunity to defer their utility payments, and I think those categories include – I’m just trying to see here if it’s super obvious; it may or may not be.

But, in essence, what we’re looking at is that households, family households, are one group, then small businesses are another group, and then larger corporations are another group. What we would like to be able to do at least with those if not, actually, further groups is have the information broken down by category. How much of the deferral and the loan that the government of Alberta made to them was taken up by each group? Was it 80 per cent large corporations? Was it 80 per cent small business? Was it 80 per cent private citizens, or citizens in a residential setting? You know, which is it? That, to me, would be a reasonable thing that should be part of the reporting.

Of course, we don’t see any requirement for that in this piece of legislation. You know, that’s really unfortunate because what we are talking about is creating a liability either for consumers of electricity and natural gas – well, ultimately, it is consumers,

electricity and natural gas consumers. They are ultimately the ones who are going to be responsible for this liability, and they should have full line of sight as to whose default they are funding, should they be asked to fund that default by expanding on the cost to them through the application of rate riders. Why would we not ensure that electricity and gas consumers have full transparency about what might ultimately contribute to a bump in their utility costs down the road? There’s no reason other than, of course, I will say that this government is quite known for, I don’t know, its allergy to transparency and its allergic reaction to the idea of being up front and open with people. I mean, you know . . .

Ms Hoffman: It’s the least transparent government in Canada.

Ms Notley: Indeed I was going to make that point, Member for Edmonton-Glenora, that in fact just last week we saw this government voted the least transparent government in Canada by the Canadian Association of Journalists. You know, that’s not a particularly great prize to win, particularly in times like this, when people need to have more faith in government, not less.

Then, of course, you know, that was just with respect to primarily the ridiculous situation with the government’s decision to create a \$30 million fund and not tell anybody what they were doing with it. But we’ve also since then seen the travesty which was the hijacking of the budget process and the fact that we decided that we didn’t need to go through regular processes to pass and/or debate the budget that governs the whole province of the country. That was also unprecedented in pretty much certainly Canadian parliamentary history.

Given that general commitment to keeping things hidden, it’s not surprising that transparency does not exist here, but, you know, a word to the wise: the issues of utility costs are hot-button issues. Albertans are going to want to know what the rationale is for rate riders which may find themselves on their electricity and natural gas bills. You should be passing legislation that makes it very clear that they have a right to know it. That is not currently included in this legislation, so it is something that needs to be changed. Certainly we will be making proposals for that to change, and I would certainly urge members opposite to consider taking a step forward into the world of transparency.

As I said before, what we see here is the issue of rate riders as a means of dealing with defaults with respect to the payment of utilities by customers to providers. You know, again, I mean, there are different ways in which the liability for default needs to be considered. Do you socialize it amongst taxpayers? Do you ask utility providers to chip in, take on a little bit of the risk? Or do you make consumers themselves pay for it? The question becomes: at what point is the use of rate riders a means of ensuring that default is not something that the utility provider has to worry about? Do we then end up in a situation where they’re not pursuing payment from customers that they ought to be pursuing payment from? I think in particular of larger businesses, that might well have the ability to pay. But why would the utility provider bother to pursue payment if they know that they’re going to be covered for it? Ultimately, consumers as a whole are going to have to pay the bills of bad actors. Sometimes, obviously, it’s not recoverable, but we don’t know, and we are concerned that the socialization of this risk to other customers, including households and regular Alberta families, is not the best for public policy. There are other ways of distributing the risk within our economy, and we don’t think that this is the best way.

3:10

Now, as I said before, we also see through the interaction of sections 7, 8, 17, and 18 that we basically have a situation where

the utility provider can charge interest to the person who has deferred payment. But at the same time that they're charging interest until that payment is paid in June of 2021 – they can charge interest for it, but at the same time they're actually getting access to a loan to cover the amount that is being deferred, from either the Balancing Pool or the government of Alberta, which must provide them that loan on an interest-free basis. We don't get why that would be structured that way other than to try to hide a little bonbon of a gift to utility providers.

To be clear, I know that there's a huge number of utility providers, but we do know that the vast majority of the market is ATCO, EPCOR, Enmax, and one other. I can't remember what the fourth one is. But none of these folks, as far as we've noticed lately, are struggling in a huge way, so I'm not entirely sure why we are setting something up to give them an extra incentive or extra money. If we have somehow misinterpreted that, I would be happy to have the minister or anyone else come through and walk us through how the interaction of those four sections does not create that situation.

In fact, just to be clear, it's not a small amount of money, because at least for some people – about 25 per cent of the market, I think it is, with residential consumers, anyway – you see the section that suggests that the provider can charge carrying costs that are calculated with reference to the weighted average of the cost of capital. What that amounted to, for instance, for EPCOR in 2017 was 6.38 per cent. That's not a small amount. If that is an interest rate that is being charged to customers who are deferring their utility payments over the course of a year, then it's not nothing. If that's happening and if they can charge that, why, then, are we giving them the opportunity to then borrow money from the Balancing Pool or the government of Alberta with no fee and no interest attached? Anyway, that's what it looks like to us. We're more than happy to have someone come and walk us through how that's not what it says, but that's what it looks like. That is a concern for obvious reasons.

Now, another thing that we did want to talk about was the issue of the period of deferral. As is clearly outlined, as I said, in the act under the definitions sections, the deferral period runs from March 18, 2020, to June 18, 2020. That's very clear. It's right there in the act. So that's there. Now, in question period today the Member for Calgary-McCall asked why we are only letting people defer for three months when we know that this crisis is not going to end in June of 2020, when we know that the unemployment rate is going to remain historically low and the economy historically challenged for – you know, keep our fingers crossed – hopefully only 12 months, not too much more, but, you know, we don't know. And because we know – very clearly, on the radio this morning the Premier himself, once he got past his sort of blaming the workers around the Cargill thing, very wisely said: be clear; the virus doesn't disappear when we move into reopening and relaunch. He very wisely said that it's there until we get a vaccine or potentially herd immunity, although the science on that is a little less clear. Because of that, people will – you know, we may overshoot, and businesses may have to close again, or people may get ill, or the economy will still be very, very sluggish, and as a result, people will struggle to pay their bills. Now, I'm not saying that we want that to happen. We don't want that to happen, but it's pretty clear that June 18, 2020, is a very arbitrary date that has very little relationship to the economic capacity of regular Alberta families to make their utility payments.

The minister said: "Ah. Well, that's just silly, you know. I can do whatever I want, and we can change it if we have to." So we went. I left question period, and I went back and read through the act, and I tried to find that. "Well, okay. Maybe we misread it. Where can

they change that?" I've got to tell you, Mr. Speaker, that I don't find it. I don't find it anywhere. There is the section on regulatory authority, and it doesn't specifically give the minister that authority anywhere in the regulations to change the term of the deferral period.

There is one section, under Regulations – I know I'm getting a little lawyerly here, but this will be probably one of the few times I get a chance to speak about this – that reads that the minister can provide "for any matter that the Minister considers is not provided for or is insufficiently provide for in this Act." I just need to say that one could argue that that particular regulatory authority gives the minister carte blanche to also, you know, order all Albertans to be given a pony for Christmas, I suppose.

But the reality is that that particular regulatory language is unlikely to stand the test of time, or should it ever be tested judicially, it is unlikely to stand, because you can't by regulation slip in the power to also write in legislation and create new programs and spend new money and do fun things by regulation in that vague way. Like, that's not legal, so it won't last. And that's the only section where maybe he could think that he has the ability to completely rewrite the legislation, but he doesn't. He doesn't. You can't do that, so it would be struck down. I mean, if the regulation-making authority specifically said to amend the length of the deferral period described in section blah, blah, blah, yeah, he might be able to do that, but he can't do it the way it is right now, the way it's written there. We have, then, a piece of legislation that has a deferral period that is finite and no clear mechanism within the act to extend that.

You know, as we know, there's the: will we or won't we come back to fix Bill 10? I think we're on – I don't know – our third or fourth version of amending the Emergency Management Act. When you pass legislation super fast without sort of listening to the other guys because you just hate talking to people, without consultation, whatever, you then end up having to come back into the House and pass more legislation. Our concern with this is: why not just get it right initially? Why not give yourselves the authority to extend the deferral period? I think the odds are good that you're going to need it. So that should be in there, but it's not in there right now, and instead it's a very, very – you know, it's of limited value, this act. We're here talking about this act, and it's going to be out of date in two months – or not even – in many respects.

Then we get into the issue of how long people have to pay it back. I think that that, too, is a problem. I think it's great to set out a time, but I think that, again, the period of time within which people have to pay it back also needs to be given – there needs to be more flexibility on that because, again, we can't predict the future. We can sit around in here and the folks over there, some of them, can sit around the cabinet table or you can sit around your caucus table and say: we're going to cross our fingers and hope that we have a V-shaped economic recovery and that everything is going to be right back to normal this time next year, so we're good to go. But if the last two months have taught us anything, I think it would be that that way of thinking is probably not helpful in a situation like this.

Again, we're not saying that some people wouldn't be able to pay it back within a year, but it's also very possible that some people won't be able to. Yet it seems to be very clear in here that that is the only option.

3:20

Again, the time during which people can defer, you know, just up until May, seems to be unnecessarily short, and the time that people have to pay it back seems to be unnecessarily strict. It doesn't mean that it couldn't be shorter, but there should be room for it to be longer. That is what we would argue to ensure that we

don't have ourselves coming in here unnecessarily in the future to fix it yet again. I'm all for having robust legislative debates and legislative agendas, but if a third of our time is spent fixing other pieces over and over, which we do seem to be getting into a habit of doing in this Legislature, I don't think that's a good use of anybody's time.

It goes to, then, the final piece, which is probably the most important piece about this, which is that what we have here is a piece of legislation designed to incent and reward utility providers for giving people a three-month break on paying their utilities or, to put it another way, loaning people the cost of their utilities for three months. I just want to say that I, you know, have heard from so many people across this province about how they are increasingly getting very, very upset that almost all the support that we see coming from this government in particular is essentially a loan or a deferral of payment obligations. In very few cases are we actually seeing significant actual support for Albertans and the provision of actual financial benefits beyond the ability to borrow money.

We certainly hear it from the business community. I cannot tell you how many small and medium-sized business owners we have conferred with in the last four weeks who have said: yeah, well, I guess it's great that, you know, we spent \$1.7 billion on Keystone. That's probably worth it to the economy although now apparently the Premier is also factoring in the cost of the default on that as spent money, so I'm a little worried about that. I'm pretty sure that we should not be counting the need to pay out on the loan guarantee as money that's already spent. That's not good news for the completion of the pipeline, nor is it a very honest characterization of the amount of money that the government of Alberta has contributed to building the economy. Nonetheless, people will say: "Okay. So we're doing this stuff for that sector. That's great."

But, you know, there are a lot of small businesses throughout this province, and up till now they've just not seen a lot of support from this government. They talk about tax deferrals and invitations to try to work out a rent solution with their landlord. They see the federal-provincial rent support program as being profoundly narrow in its eligibility criteria and inaccessible to the vast majority of small-business people. I mean, the federal government has done the wage subsidy, which is great, but that's the federal government. Once again, that's not the provincial government. I mean, there are deferrals of property tax and things like that, but really they're not seeing a lot of support for small businesses.

We've of course been talking about the relaunch. You know, many businesses have talked about how there are going to be additional costs because reopening, in order to do so safely, is costly, and at the same time, in addition to having to put in upfront costs, in many cases businesses won't be able to open at the same level that they have in the past. Their revenue stream will be diminished significantly while their upfront costs are much higher, so they're very worried about how they're going to get through that period. Some businesses will handle it better than others, but I'm just not sure if we want to be entirely Darwinian about our support of small and medium-sized businesses in this province at this time. I think we have the capacity to provide support to our small and medium-sized businesses, and we should think about doing that.

Anyway, up until now what we've mostly seen are loans. The same is true for families as far as it relates to support from this government. You know, we saw the sort of let's call it an underachieving emergency isolation support grant, that I think we saw roughly a hundred thousand people were able to access. By our estimates, that was about a third of the people who were actually eligible for it. That is \$100 million that was spent by this government. That's great, but when you compare it to what you're seeing in other provinces and what you're seeing from other levels

of government, it's a bit of a drop in the bucket. We know that most regular families are not getting the same sort of proportion of support or attention in this province as they would see in other jurisdictions or in relation to specific sectors in Alberta.

The other thing that I would suggest is that in other jurisdictions, instead of just a loan, what you're actually seeing is a credit or a grant or in some cases targeted relief. For instance, in B.C., with B.C. Hydro, you didn't pay for three months. That was it. It was gone. You don't then have to worry about paying it back over the next 12 months; it just disappeared. That's the way it went there.

In Ontario it was not that generous, but what they did do was that they came up with a targeted utility relief program for low-income families and low-income earners. So there was a targeted level of support there. Again, that's not what we're seeing in Alberta.

As the Member for Calgary-McCall has already said, you know, we just last fall removed the cap on electricity fees, and we've seen in many cases that those fees have bumped up well above that cap as a result of its disappearance. I'm sure it won't surprise anybody over there to know that some Albertans actually thought that they elected a government that was going to make things less expensive for them, not more expensive. Yet every time you turn around, we are definitely – even pre-COVID, to be clear, we were in a net much more expensive for Albertans than we were before kind of position.

There could have been a means of suggesting that a cap on fees remain in place for a time while families are trying to figure out their budgets, figure out how to keep food on the table, figure out how to keep themselves in their houses, how to keep their families secure. Also, as businesses are struggling with the high levels of volatility that they are currently having to plan through as they think about their reopening or their expansion or their adjustment, even if they remained open, they have, you know, seen significant drops in business, and they have to adjust how they do business. So there's a lot of planning for change going on in our small and medium-sized businesses. If they could be given the confidence that their utility costs would not end up being yet another spiralling or accelerating fixed cost, that would be also helpful to them.

Overall, then, the point is that you see numerous examples in other jurisdictions of government stepping in to actually eliminate this pressure altogether. Here what we are doing is deferring it for a very short period of time, a prematurely short period of time, and allowing for interest to be applied against people who are unable to pay their utilities and then rewarding the utility providers for participating in this arrangement but leaving actual consumers to ultimately pay the full cost and potentially also the cost of default from certain consumers. So you might actually see regular families paying more through your rate rider plan. Not a win for regular families: for the privilege of putting off paying for three months, they'll pay more. In fact, it's not actually just them because even people who are paying and not deferring right now will see those rate riders put on their utility costs in order to cover the liability from default.

3:30

All in all, good principle; execution needs work. I know that members in my caucus will be speaking to this in more detail and that we are in the midst of putting together a number of amendments. I certainly hope that the members opposite will consider a number of those amendments so that we can get the bill right this time and we don't need to come back and reintroduce it and amend it, you know, two and a half months from now because that would be irritating, I think, for everybody.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, for the opportunity to rise and review the concerns that we have identified thus far with this bill, understanding, of course, that we got our briefing on Wednesday morning, I believe. Was it Wednesday morning?

An Hon. Member: Monday.

Ms Notley: Monday. Oh, no. We got the bill on Monday but the briefing Tuesday morning.

We're still doing our homework on it, so we may have more to say. Of course, the questions that we asked: we'd certainly be happy to get clarification if there is clarification to be offered.

With that, I will take my seat. Thank you very much.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

Are there any other members looking to join debate on Bill 14, second reading? I see the hon. Member for Calgary-McCall has risen.

Mr. Sabir: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to speak to Bill 14, Utility Payment Deferral Program Act. Actually, it's almost one year. This is the first time the title of the bill actually suggests what the government is trying to do, so that's good. I have read the bill in detail. I have talked to my constituents. I have talked to many concerned Albertans. I have talked to even some consumer groups as well.

The way the bill is set up: I understand that it impacts two sets of audiences. One is Albertans, their businesses, farms, and the other is utility companies. When it comes to Albertans, what this bill is doing: it's only deferring their utility bills within the deferral period, which is defined as March 18, 2020, and ending on June 18, 2020. So the bill is just providing Albertans, some businesses, and farms an ability to defer their bill within that three-month period. That's all it's doing. It's a bare minimum. Like, we have asked for relief for Albertans, consumers, so we will support this, but make no mistake that it's the bare minimum, and Albertans have been asking for more than that. The bill certainly is not going far enough.

When I got the bill briefing, there were a couple of things that were still outstanding where I was assured that the minister will get back to me. I will talk about that as well. But the way this bill was described was this: they're bringing forward this piece of legislation to fulfill the commitment they made in early March to defer utilities for three months. There was no consultation, actual consultation, done with Albertans, consumers, or consumer groups. Otherwise, I think we wouldn't be seeing a piece of legislation that suggests deferring utilities just for three months, ending on June 18, 2020. Even with government's own plans, when they're talking about relaunching the economy, their plans go into the fall to relaunch the economy, and I don't know how providing only three months' deferral helps Albertans, their businesses in any way. It's just piling up their liability, that they will be asked to pay with certain terms and conditions, which I also take issue with, and I will talk in detail about those terms and conditions, too.

But this bill clearly is not going far enough. Over the last three weeks every person, every individual, every business owner I spoke to within my riding, within Calgary, whoever I can talk to: I think people are deeply worried, deeply concerned about their jobs. They're deeply concerned about their livelihoods, household expenses, their business expenses. Utilities are certainly one thing that comes up fairly often along with rent and those other things. So just deferring utility bills for three months is not helping Albertans, and it's not what Albertans are looking for.

If we look at other provinces, for instance, Ontario: they are making sure that people in Ontario don't pay peak prices within the deferral period. They are providing actual relief. Similarly with British Columbia: they are providing actual relief, the same as Quebec, Saskatchewan. But here we are seeing a government that puts forward this piece of legislation just to defer three months of utility bills and then comes up with a plan where the utility

companies who are entering into these loan agreements may be able to get loans interest-free. They will have one year to collect from consumers those deferred amounts, and if they are not able to collect those, they will have rate rider provisions where all those losses, if any company incurs any loss, will be socialized on all Albertans.

At the end of the day, instead of providing Albertans any relief, this legislation: as it's written – and to assure the minister, I have read it clause by clause – Albertans will be on the hook for any losses that companies may incur in providing these deferrals. Those losses will be socialized on all Albertans. That's written within this legislation. At the committee stage, when we will do clause-by-clause analysis, we will point out certain clauses of the legislation that have the impact of socializing these losses of companies onto Albertans, off-loading these losses onto Albertans – certainly, that's not relief in any definition of that word, "relief" – even within the period, repayment period, where companies will be able to collect the deferred amount.

3:40

Also, it's in the legislation put forward by the minister that companies would be able to charge consumers – Albertans, their businesses, their farms – the weighted average cost of their capital. In other words, they are getting loans from the government through the Balancing Pool, and within that repayment period they will be making some money on those deferred utility payments because they can add that weighted average cost of their capital to their bills. For instance – I was looking up quickly – in 2017 EPCOR forecasted their weighted average cost of capital at 6.38 per cent. In other words, that will be the amount, that will be the rate that these utility companies will be able to charge on those deferred utilities.

While Albertans are struggling to make their ends meet, while they're losing jobs, while they're losing on their businesses, while other liabilities are piling up on them, instead of providing any real relief, government came up with this, where families, businesses, and Albertans will have to shoulder the cost of these deferred loans to get some relief or get these deferrals in place. I think Albertans deserve far better than this from this government.

Then along with these rate rider provisions, where they have come up with a very clever scheme of socializing all the losses of these utility companies and making Albertans pay for that, they also put in place Crown immunity so that no company will be able to sue the government for anything and their only recourse will be to recoup their losses from Albertans by adding these costs through rate rider provisions. That's not relief in any way, shape, or manner. One, they will have accrued liability of three-month deferrals, and now they're also liable for other costs, interest, and these weighted average capital costs as well, so they will be paying more to these companies.

In a democratic government with respect for the rule of law, we don't exempt the Crown from immunity just lightly. There is a long history of how, back in the day, the king was immune from everything, and there was a huge struggle, how government – their kings were made to obey the law of the land and obey the rule of law. Whenever that immunity is put in place in legislation, it's never done lightly. When I asked about policy rationale during my brief – "What's the rationale for having Crown immunity there?" – the only answer was, "So that no one can sue the government because of this program." That was the answer I received, and I don't think that's enough of a rationale to make the Crown immune from any liability. They are coming up with the program. They should articulate their program. They should execute their program. And if there are mistakes, if there are things that they should have done better, I think they should focus on that and not just put in a

blanket immunity from any kind of lawsuits coming out of this program.

Another thing: they also put in a provision that any agreements, anything done under this act will be exempt from the provisions of the Financial Administration Act. That's section 22 of this legislation. It says that it will be exempt from section 42.1 of the Financial Administration Act. What that section does: basically, that section says that if the Crown enters into a loan agreement or acquires some shares in a corporation, they are required to furnish those agreements before the Legislative Assembly in a certain time period after the fiscal year in which that agreement is entered ends.

Recently they received an award from the Canadian Association of Journalists, the code of silence award for outstanding achievement in government secrecy in the provincial category. I think that having this provision will ensure that they might continue to receive that award going forward as well, and if they don't want to be receiving those kinds of unfortunate awards, they should remove that provision.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

Standing Order 29(2)(a) is available should anybody have any questions, comments. I see the hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora has risen.

Ms Hoffman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker and to the member for his helpful discussion as it relates to this bill here today. I know that this is a difficult time of year for a lot of folks throughout our world and that many people here in our province are grappling, of course, with the impacts to their personal incomes, their business incomes and trying to figure out how best to navigate this new situation.

I appreciate that the bill does appear to be titled in direct relation to what the legislation intends to do. As the member said, that certainly is exciting to see, a bill that speaks directly to the actual legislation in terms of the title.

I'm hoping that the member can maybe elaborate a little bit on some of the pieces in the bill that he finds helpful at this point. I know that we're still early, only having just begun second reading, so there's still going to be opportunity for consideration of ways to improve this legislation. But I thought the member could take another probably three and a half minutes to discuss some areas that he sees of strength in this bill because I do think there are some. It's nice to have an opportunity to focus on some of those because we will certainly have an opportunity in the not-so-distant future to talk about some of the areas that we think could be improved, but perhaps at second he can touch on some of the strengths.

Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: I see the hon. Member for Calgary-McCall has risen to respond with three and a half minutes.

Mr. Sabir: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I think I did mention at the opening of my remarks that as a caucus we have asked for relief for consumers. As a caucus we have heard from many Albertans, many businesses that Albertans are concerned about and looking for relief, in particular with their rent, utilities, and those kinds of costs. The principle of the bill: I still support it, that still it's better than having nothing to have some flexibility that they can defer their utilities for three months. So it's a good thing in the bill. What needs to be discussed and what needs to be improved is: at what cost? Who are we trying to protect here? That needs to be certainly looked into in more detail.

3:50

Another thing: I think the bill makes it retroactive that during these three months no utility company or no gas utility or any utility company that's within the scope of this legislation – they won't be able to disconnect anyone's utility for nonpayment. In other words, this piece of legislation is making utility companies – it's a must for them that, if requested, they enter into these arrangements and agree to defer the utilities and not disconnect utilities during this deferral period. Again, the utility deferral period is only from March 18 to June 18. We know that that is not enough. The threat of this pandemic is not over yet, where many organizations – if they won't take my word, take the Calgary Chamber of commerce's word. They said that it may take from one year to 18 months before people could get back to work, the economy could get back to work. We can ask any Albertan, any random sampling of Albertans. If you ask them if three months are enough, I don't think that anyone in this entire province will agree with them that three months is enough deferral period.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

I see that the hon. Member for Edmonton-Whitemud has risen to speak.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to rise today to speak to Bill 14, Utility Payment Deferral Program Act. I, too, like my colleagues, would like to commend the title of the act when it clearly indicates what it's going to do. I think we're at that point now where we have to comment on the titles of the acts, but I'm happy to do that as well.

I'm going to begin by actually saying that we've had some discussion already around the time period set out in this bill and why the time period that is specified within the definition section of the deferral period in the act – you know, it's specified as being from March 18, 2020, to June 18, 2020. Of course, I look at those dates and I think: well, obviously, that must align with the three-month issuance of the public health emergency, and that must be why it's issued from March 18 to June 18, 2020. Of course, we know that the public health emergency order could be extended, and those authorities are there.

The reason why I comment specifically to begin with about that time period is because I see the fact that we are in the Legislature today debating this bill as an indication that the government has recognized that it should actually not use the powers that it granted itself under the former Bill 10 in the way that it granted itself. Why I say that is because we raised concerns at the time that Bill 10 was introduced. As you may recall, Mr. Speaker, that was an amendment to the Public Health Act, and it allowed for extraordinary powers to be granted to ministers to not just modify or suspend existing legislation but actually to, through ministerial order, bypass the Legislative Assembly and introduce new legislative schemes by ministerial order for the period of time during which the public health order was in place.

I see the fact that we are actually in the Assembly debating this legislation as a positive sign. I see that as some sort of acknowledgement by the government that they should not use the powers that they extraordinarily granted themselves under Bill 10, likely because they are unconstitutional. Concerns that members of this House raised at the time – in fact, I had the privilege myself of speaking to that and being scoffed at and rebuked, actually, by the members opposite. And yet, you know, a few weeks later we actually saw that the Premier acknowledged that there were problems with Bill 10. So I think it's a good sign, at least, that the government has acknowledged that it has made some oversteps

with respect to its authority. The fact that we're in the House debating this piece of legislation right now I take to be an indication that they do believe it is important even in a public health situation for certain pieces of legislation to come before this Assembly so that they can be evaluated, considered, debated, and suggestions proposed by all members of this Assembly.

Of course, we made the point even within debate on Bill 10 that limiting the possibility of legislation coming before this House is not simply an obvious curtailment of the opposition's privilege to debate and hold the government to account, but it also is a curtailment of the privileges of private members of any party. So I just begin that by saying that I noted that this seems to be clearly linked to the powers that the government gave itself under Bill 10, but they're choosing instead – and I'm appreciative of that – that we are actually in the Assembly to debate it.

I want to go back to some of the comments that actually the Leader of the Official Opposition and the Member for Calgary-McCall indicated, which is that we are, of course – since the pandemic has begun, I think that all individuals, all members of this Assembly have been hearing significant concerns from their constituents, from businesses, from people all across this province who are struggling with what has been probably a monumental impact on most Albertans' lives. It's something I continue to tell my small children when they're home right now. I say to them: you know, we don't actually have any experience in the past. Their parents: we don't have experience dealing with this in the past. It is unprecedented. This is not normal, but we do have to cope with it. I know that many of the members have heard and dealt with their constituents' concerns and complaints, and I appreciate that we are still talking about ways to relieve those anxieties and to provide relief to Albertans, as they so need.

However, I have been disheartened during the last few weeks to see that consistently what's happening is that we have to just make do with the bare minimum of supports from this government. We've indicated already that it would be not appropriate for the opposition to oppose any relief measures where there actually is relief in sight, but we're in the position now where we have to say: well, I guess this is better than nothing. Unfortunately, that's not the standard of support and help that I believe Albertans deserve. I think they deserve a much higher standard than that. I think they deserve to be listened to honestly and genuinely provided with the support that they need. I want to highlight again that, of course, granting a deferral for utility bills for residential consumers, small businesses, farms: that's important, it's good, it's better than doing nothing. But as we have said numerous times already and, I think, we will continue to say, we could do a lot better.

That seems to be the approach from this government. And let's be clear. It's a very unique approach to this government. Other provinces and the federal government have stepped up with providing concrete financial support and relief – not just postponing the problem, but relief – for their citizens. I don't know why we have to keep struggling to establish or to give the bare minimum to Albertans. I don't know why we wouldn't want to provide a little bit better. I will say for certain that, you know, I'm not going to disagree with the idea of providing supports to Albertans – and deferrals, I suppose, are better than nothing – but I know that that approach has failed to resonate with Albertans in terms of actual, concrete support from their provincial government.

Mr. Speaker, as you may be aware, one of my critic portfolios is, of course, Children's Services. For months that was the same messaging that child care operators were provided, that there are no direct financial supports coming but there are deferrals available, there are loans available. The frustration and the absolute anxiety coming from those small businesses – some are private; some are

nonprofit – operators saying: "I can't afford to take on a deferral. I can't afford to take on a loan." Now we're saying the same thing to individual Albertans. We're saying: "We're not going to provide you concrete relief; we're just going to put it off for a little while. And, yes, by the way, your utility provider can charge you interest on that, and, yes, you've only got a year to pay it off. So you're getting something. You don't have to pay your bill this month, but you will have to start paying, and you'll have to start to pay a little bit more to make up for what you couldn't pay this month."

4:00

That's actually something I want to talk about as well a little bit. When I look at, again, the time period of the deferral period in the legislation, March 18 to June 18, we're sitting here in the House, and we're already well into the first week of May. At this point in time – I have to say that I had to get confirmation from my partner at home because I wasn't entirely sure – most Albertans will have already paid their utility bills for March. Many of them will have already paid their utility bills for April. It all depends, of course, on your billing cycle. Some may prepay for their utilities. So to provide relief that's retroactive, I have to ask the question: how much relief are we actually providing? How many Albertans have had to make the difficult decision over the last couple of months about bill payments when their income is reduced or eliminated altogether and they, perhaps, were not eligible or, even if they were eligible, did not receive the provincial isolation support? Maybe they're on the federal supports. But they've had to make difficult choices about how to pay bills when there's not enough money to pay them. So many of them have likely already paid their utility bills.

It is interesting and frustrating a little bit to me, and perhaps there's clarification on that. Perhaps that analysis was done about how many Albertans maybe still have their March utility bills outstanding, and this is going to provide real relief to those Albertans. I welcome that information, but I know that in my household we've already paid two months of our utility bills, so we wouldn't actually be eligible unless perhaps there's another option available that they're going to repay. I'm not sure exactly what the process is there. I just raise that as a question because this is retroactive going back almost two months now. I just question whether or not that relief could have been provided earlier. If Albertans knew that this deferral was going to come, actually going to come, then perhaps different decisions would have been made. I regret that that seems to be how these supports from the provincial government also seem to be rolled out. I don't know why we are so reluctant to provide direct support to Albertans for what they're calling for.

I want to echo the comments from the Leader of the Official Opposition, who talked about: who exactly is going to be benefiting from this situation? We don't know, unless there is a crystal ball that the government has and is privy to information that most Albertans are not, about what's going to magically happen in the middle of June. Do we actually genuinely believe – again, if this legislation had come forward at the time that the public health emergency order was put in place almost two months ago, I would say: okay; they're ballparking it here. Three months from now – it was hard to predict at that point how things were going to go. Timed with the timing of the public health emergency order: okay. But we are almost now two months into this period, and I think it's fair to say, we all can say, that things are not going to be back to normal on June 18, and they may not be back to normal for a very long time.

So it feels like there's an arbitrariness to this date. I echo the comments from the Leader of the Official Opposition about the fact of: yeah, sure, we can certainly amend this, but we will be coming

back into the House to do that. There is no authority by regulation to do that. Again, putting my lawyer hat on, we know that regulations actually cannot amend legislation unless there is express authority to do so in the regulation-making authorities, which does not exist, as the Leader of the Official Opposition pointed out.

Again, we can't pretend that this legislation, which might have made more sense two months ago, two months into it now, when we also know that there is no other direct financial supports that have been provided to Albertans – again, maybe deferral on utility payments would be reasonable had there been more concrete financial supports being provided by this government to Albertans already, but they haven't. All we've seen are deferrals for WCB, for property taxes, for education taxes. That's all we've seen. To me, this is a little bit too little too late, and it then suggests to me that really this is not about the individual consumer. The intention of this bill is not really about that. It's actually about providing an opportunity for utility providers to be able to get interest-free loans and to spread the risk of default around to all Albertans. That's what it really feels like this is about.

I defer to the Member for Calgary-McCall, who was part of the bill briefings, who asked those questions about consultation, about some of the specific provisions. I was not privy, of course, to that bill briefing. You know, this is not an area that I can say that I have a lot of constituents or utility providers that have been reaching out to me, but I do question the level of consultation. Who was consulted with, and who was really the impetus behind this legislation? Who brought it forward as something that needed to happen? Because it doesn't seem, actually, that it's targeted at assisting individual Albertans the way it should be. Again, I can't argue with something being better than nothing, but I'm regretful that that is the stage that we are at now with respect to supports for Albertans.

I actually want to pick up on a comment that the Member for Calgary-McCall brought up with respect to a very specific provision of Bill 14, and that was the provision about the immunity for Crown liability. As the Member for Calgary-McCall knows and I agree with, with my legal background as well, it is not a common thing to excuse or grant immunity to the Crown from liability because, of course, government should also be held accountable for the programs it initiates, for the actions it has taken. Certainly, given the vast authority and power of the Crown, it would not be appropriate except for extraordinary circumstances to actually limit their liability. As the Member for Calgary-McCall indicated, there didn't seem to be a reasonable explanation at all. In fact, no rationale was provided for that.

But it got me to thinking about something that I've been hearing a lot about from those small-business owners and some of those industries that are scheduled to be part of phase 1 of reopening next week, potentially. One of the comments that they made was with respect to the need for industry-specific and sector-specific health and safety protocols. This really resonated with me, actually, because we had a conversation, my caucus colleagues and I, with almost 200 hairstylists and barbers earlier this week, and one of the comments . . .

The Acting Speaker: Thank you.

Hon. members, 29(2)(a) is available. I see the hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood has risen.

Member Irwin: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm always quite riveted when my colleague from Edmonton-Whitemud is speaking. She was just telling us a little bit about a conversation that we had with

hairstylists and barbers, and I was on the edge of my seat, so if she could please continue her thoughts.

Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Whitemud.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I do not want to leave the Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood in suspense any longer, so I will finish my thought.

What I was going to say was that my caucus colleagues and I had this conversation with these hairstylists, and one of the comments that one of the hairstylists made about why they felt it was so important for the government to issue clear health and safety protocols was to protect them from liability. While certain organizations and professions that have been reopened such as dentists or chiropractors or physiotherapists have the benefit of having a professional college or regulatory body to provide guidance like that, a lot of small businesses and in this case hairstylists and barbers don't have that. They don't have an overarching body that provides those standards to them. What they were saying is: we need to have some confidence that what we're doing is consistent with what everybody else, the hairstylist down the road, is doing, that I'm not being disadvantaged because I'm taking this more seriously than the person down the road.

That idea of protection from liability is a fair one, and that is the role of government, to provide those directions and standards, especially in a time where this is unprecedented, where there are no other bodies to provide that direction. It is. Everybody is on the edge of their seat most days watching the daily briefing from the chief medical officer of health. Albertans are looking to the government for guidance because they need to protect themselves as well. They need to know that they're conducting their practice and their business in accordance with the best medical information, which they don't have. That's actually the privilege right now of the government, having that information and data at their hands. To develop those standards: they're calling out for that. Instead, we're hearing from the government, "You know your business better than we do, so just handle your business the way you always do," but there's genuine fear out there about liability. There's genuine fear that if they don't do it the way they think they're supposed to do it, because they're not health professionals – they don't know. They're genuinely worried about that. Yet here we have a piece of legislation coming from the government . . . [interjections]

4:10

The Acting Speaker: Order. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Whitemud has the call right now, so if she could please continue.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you.

As I was just saying before I was interrupted, the reason why that calls to my attention and why I'm concerned about that is because while the government is not providing any protection to individual business owners from liability, they're awfully quick to provide protection from liability for themselves. In this piece of legislation we have an extraordinary measure of granting the Crown immunity from a program which, obviously, they see some risk involved because they don't want to carry any of it, and they're actually saying that we as the Crown should not have any liability for the administration of this program. It brings to mind again: whose interests are we putting forward right now? Are we looking out for the average Albertans, the business owners, the employees who are going to work with standards that they don't have, that they don't know about? We're not willing at this point – the government has not issued any measures to help them to protect themselves from

liability, yet they're willing to excuse themselves from it very quickly with no rationale.

I do hope when we get into Committee of the Whole – usually there's an opportunity for a little bit more back-and-forth in that setting with the minister – that we will hear some feedback as to why the minister felt that that was appropriate in this situation and to hear a little bit more about the timelines that were chosen, the mechanisms by which they will evaluate whether or not June 18 is an appropriate end date. How will they determine whether or not to extend that? I think these are all questions that we'll want to have discussions about. What relief will they provide to those individuals who maybe have already paid their utility bills? Is there an opportunity for that and discussions basically around: whose interests are we looking to protect here?

As the Member for Calgary-McCall and the Leader of the Official Opposition indicated, I look forward to putting forward some amendments because while we do support this, we do think that there is a lot more that can be done to actually protect the interests of Albertans and to provide some real, concrete relief that Albertans are begging for from this province and have yet to receive.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: Hon. members, with 22 more seconds are there any individuals looking to take advantage of that?

Seeing none, are there any other members looking to speak to second reading of Bill 14? I see the hon. Member for Edmonton-West Henday has risen.

Mr. Carson: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's an honour to rise, and also I would, first off, like to thank the previous members that have spoken this afternoon to Bill 14 here: of course, the Member for Calgary-McCall, the Member for Edmonton-Whitemud, as well as the Leader of the Official Opposition. That is a lot of lawyer-speak this afternoon, so I appreciate their ability to dissect the work that is before us.

I would also like to begin, before entering into my concerns and thoughts on this legislation, by also recognizing the many people across the province who are working on the front lines of this COVID-19 pandemic as well as the workers who have been deemed essential across the province, who are doing their best to continue that important work as safely as possible – we need to make sure as a government that we are doing our best to support them in that work – as well as the many families who are at home right now doing their best to create any sense of normal for their family and who, of course, are struggling with the fact that there are no doubt financial and other burdens being placed on families across this province.

Now, Mr. Speaker, I would start off, I suppose, by saying that I support the basic principle of deferring utilities, as is put forward in Bill 14, Utility Payment Deferral Program Act. I would also echo the sentiment of my colleagues in saying that we appreciate that the title of the bill actually reflects what is in the legislation, so that is an important first step, and also echo that this is really the very least that the UCP government could be doing right now to support our communities who are suffering deeply through this pandemic. Specifically on the issue of utilities, I will reiterate the fact that this legislation is the least we can do. It really, at many points through this pandemic, seems to be that the UCP in many cases is striving for doing the least they can do, and we see that here in this legislation.

You know, we've been calling on the UCP for several weeks on this specific issue to take action to protect ratepayers or those who are unable to afford the cost of utilities as they do what has been asked of them, which is to stay home and isolate yourself as best as you can from the general public. Now, the problem that we've seen

over and over again from the UCP is that after all of their deliberations, many of which we have not actually heard – we, I suppose, see those behind closed doors – they come back to the Legislature to bring forward legislation that does not go far enough to support the Albertans who are counting on every single MLA in this government to do the right thing and provide the proper supports that Albertans need right now. The provincial government, of course, is uniquely positioned to help ease the financial burden that Albertans are finding themselves in at this very moment, but we are seeing that our vision on this side of the House, in the NDP caucus, is much different than the vision in the UCP benches.

We've seen once again in certain instances that the UCP is working on the bare minimum. When they rolled out the emergency income support program through MyAlberta online ID, it was a massive fiasco. This program had people waiting several days in a broken queue, who were often kicked out of that queue and asked to start over several times. I had many complaints from constituents on that very issue. We saw the program paused and restarted day to day and Albertans that were eligible for funding denied until eventually, instead of fixing the program and ensuring that eligible Albertans receive those supports, without much of even a whisper the UCP shut the program down with no real explanation or course of action moving forward, essentially laying the need for supports on the federal government, which seems to be the number one play in this government's playbook.

Now, to make matters worse, it wasn't long ago that our NDP opposition and myself specifically was calling on this very minister, the Minister of Service Alberta, to reconsider the firings that happened in his department, many IT professionals that were let go, who would no doubt have been very valuable through the implementation of that program. It has become quite clear that this government in the instance of the income supports and many others is more concerned about their own optics, though they don't seem to manage those very well themselves, than actually supporting and making sure that financial supports are reaching Albertans. Indeed, in that instance of the income support we saw that the program was a complete failure, and that failure lies on the shoulders of this Premier and on that minister that was responsible for its rollout.

Now, we look to some of the other programs, like the announcement one month ago from the Service Alberta minister to freeze evictions during this pandemic, which was a good start. I supported that freeze on evictions. But since then we've heard very little from this minister, and indeed we have heard nothing about extending that specific eviction freeze. Instead, when I raised those concerns and brought them forward to the minister, I had, you know, a press secretary or staff of the minister come and say: you can look at these details. That was actually a press release from, I believe, even a month before that comment was made. We're expected to go back a month ago without any new information coming out about this important issue of rental freezes. It's simply not good enough.

The fact is, you know, you go back to that press release and what does it say? It doesn't say that the evictions freeze will continue; it says that now you have the responsibility . . .

Mr. Schow: Point of order, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: I hear a point of order has been called. The Member for Cardston-Siksika.

Point of Order Relevance

Mr. Schow: Yeah. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise on a point of order: Standing Order 23(b), speaks to matters other than the

question under discussion. Look, I understand that while the member opposite from Edmonton-West Henday wants to read the speaking notes provided to him by his legislative co-ordinator, those speaking notes are far from relevant to this discussion. We're going on three minutes and not a single mention of Bill 14, but only . . . [interjections] The time is right here. You're welcome. At least someone is paying attention here.

The reality here, Mr. Speaker, is that while I can appreciate that the Member for Edmonton-West Henday wants to throw sticks and stones at the hon. Minister of Service Alberta and whoever else he thinks is convenient at this point in time, it has nothing to do with Bill 14, so I'd ask him to maybe get to the point.

The Acting Speaker: I see the hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood has risen to respond.

Member Irwin: Thank you, Mr. Chair. This is absolutely not a point of order, and to call it under 23(b), by which the Member for Cardston-Siksika has noted that it's not relevant to the matter under discussion, is absolutely not true. In fact, the Member for Edmonton-West Henday was making really apt points, talking about utilities, talking about the connections to consumers, and I for one was actually quite pleased to hear the connections that he was making. Respectfully, this is absolutely not a point of order, and I would like to request that the member continue his points. [interjections]

4:20

The Acting Speaker: I am the one with the call right now. At this point, I do not see that there is a point of order. That said, I would remind all members of this House that the purpose of debate is to ensure that we stay on track with regard to our comments. From listening to what the hon. Member for Edmonton-West Henday was saying, I would just remind him to try to focus it towards the bill at hand.

That said, this House has historically taken a wide berth with regard to a lot of comments. If the hon. member could please continue his comments on this matter, taking into account that the goal of debate in this House is to ensure that we do not end up causing disorder. Staying on path with regard to his comments would probably aid in that effect.

Please continue.

Debate Continued

Mr. Carson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Well, I appreciate your ruling on that matter. The fact is that as the critic for Service Alberta many of these issues are related to each other, whether we're talking about eviction freezes that affect renters and tenants and landlords in our community, in just the same way that utilities affect those members. I appreciate that and I hope you appreciate that these issues do in fact link to each other. They are both equally important to the people that I represent and, I imagine, to the people that you represent as well.

Just going back to the final point that I was making there, the fact is that I brought forward concerns about the need to hear more from this government on the issue of the eviction freeze, and all that I was offered to take back to my constituents is that now these people, who once were protected by the government, are being told that they can go and take these issues up with the residential tenancy dispute resolution service.

Now, in my opinion, I appreciate that that is traditionally the course of action that tenants can take or that landlords can take to resolve disputes with each other. But the fact is that in these unprecedented times, in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, we need more leadership from the ministers of this government, and

we need more leadership from the Premier himself. I am just once again highlighting the fact that the ability for this information to get out to members of the public is of great importance, and in some instances, as I described initially here, I think that the government needs to do better.

Now, once again on that same issue with the Service Alberta minister and my concerns therein, the fact is that we debated Bill 3, which is an important piece of legislation. It's going to protect people in the province, tenants and landlords, and strengthen the relationship that they can have.

Mr. Nally: Point of order.

The Acting Speaker: I see the hon. associate minister of natural gas has risen to speak.

Point of Order Relevance

Mr. Nally: Thank you. Under Standing Order 23(b), relevance, I mean, the hon. member clearly brought the wrong speaking notes because he hasn't since the last point of order mentioned utility deferral a single time.

The Acting Speaker: As was noted, I had risen at virtually the exact same time as the hon. associate minister. The point of why I rose was because the comments that are currently being made by the hon. Member for Edmonton-West Henday are – I am starting to question whether or not there is relevance to the actual second reading of Bill 14.

If the hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood would like to stand and perhaps clarify that. However, at this stage I am starting to lean towards the idea that we want to try to direct this back to the relevant bill that we are talking about right now.

Please.

Member Irwin: Yeah. The Member for Edmonton-West Henday was absolutely again making connections. Part of his role is to protect consumers. I would respect his ability to draw those connections to utilities even though he has not said the word in about 30 seconds. It's very unfair. Again I encourage you all to listen to the comments that he's making thoughtfully and respect his ability to do so in the House.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

I will call for the hon. Member for Edmonton-West Henday to continue with his comments. If he could please try to focus them on second reading of Bill 14, that would not only help me with understanding the relevance of his comments but I think that it would also help with ensuring that his comments aren't continually interrupted with regard to any points of order.

Please continue.

Debate Continued

Mr. Carson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate that once again. I would just reflect once again that in my role as the critic of Service Alberta these issues are extremely connected to each other, as are issues further when we look to the work of what's happened in the Education ministry. Now, the fact is that the point that I'm trying to make here is that there are concerns that I have and that my constituents have about the openness of this government, about their willingness to support Albertans when they do one thing and say another. These issues are directly linked to this piece of

legislation. I would appreciate the ability to finish my thoughts on that, so thank you for that opportunity.

Now, the fact is that once again this government does one thing and says another. When we look to the Ministry of Education and the actions compared to the words that this minister took at the beginning of this pandemic, when people were looking for answers, just like they're looking for answers that are some . . .

Speaker's Ruling Relevance

The Acting Speaker: Hon. member, I'm trying to figure out where the comments of the Minister of Education come into play with regard to the specific topic that we are talking about on Bill 14. If you could please draw us, the whole House, for our benefit, towards the point of that in order to ensure that we stay within the relevance of this specific bill, Bill 14, on second reading. I am starting to maybe question whether or not my views on relevance are starting to become slightly more narrow as we continue.

Please continue.

Debate Continued

Mr. Carson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. You know, I made a direct connection there, so I'm going to try again. The fact is that the government told Albertans that they were going to protect them and their utilities. The fact is that the legislation that we have before us is a start, but I do not believe it's going far enough, just like the Minister of Education, if I can finish this point, stated in the past, that that minister would do everything in their ability to protect teaching assistants and EAs across the province and, well, when it came down to it, we lost over 20,000 of those staff. Once again in Bill 14 and in the words that they tell Albertans – unfortunately, we don't see many of those words followed up with concrete action.

Now, if we look further to the response from this Premier and his push to get people back to work – and I can appreciate that everyone needs to get back to work, one, to pay for their utilities as are being deferred through Bill 14. The fact is that we need to ensure that specific guidelines are put in place to ensure the protection and the safety of those workers and the businesses themselves in our communities. Once again, relating back to Bill 14, the fact is that we do not have those specific guidelines in place that we have been told would come before we start reopening the economy. Without that, workers are concerned that they will not have those safety protocols put in place. If workers are not willing to go back to work for safety reasons, they might need to access programs as listed through Bill 14, the Utility Payment Deferral Program Act.

Now, we see in other jurisdictions that governments are taking the issue of utility payments much more seriously than the UCP government in our province. We see direct relief in other provinces, as has been laid out by other members of the opposition here, through the creation of grants, for instance, which would go much further to support struggling Albertans compared to what we're seeing in this Bill 14, the Utility Payment Deferral Program Act.

Now, instead of assuring Albertans who are already carrying the debts and stresses of not working through the pandemic, this government is telling them that they can carry that burden forward and not worry about it for a month in many instances. As the Member for Edmonton-Whitemud pointed out, the fact is that many people have already paid the last few months of utilities. You know, it's good that they'll have opportunity for deferral for one month, but I'm arguing that it's simply not enough.

What about the families who have already paid those utilities because they weren't sure if the government was going to follow

through on their word to protect them from losing their power or other utilities? Those consumers went and paid those bills, being afraid that they would lose those utilities, and now the government is saying: don't worry; we have your back. Well, it's a little bit too late because now those same families who paid those utility bills are trying to figure out how they're going to pay for food for their family this month and next month and on and on. So it is extremely relevant, the issue that this is coming a little bit too little and too late, Mr. Speaker.

4:30

[The Speaker in the chair]

Now, we have no idea what the situation will look like a month from now or even further on, but there is no doubt that Albertans will be doing their best to figure out how to catch up on their bills, and delaying this burden instead of more meaningful support, in my opinion, is not the right answer. These same families will already be thinking about the mortgage deferrals or already be dealing with the mortgage deferrals that they have been offered by differing levels of government, from the federal government, so now they're dealing with the deferral of such a large cost within their mortgage, and they're being told that they can also defer costs with their utilities. Well, it will help some families, but it will not help all families, Mr. Speaker.

There is no doubt that utility companies have been doing their best, trying to support communities across our province and across Canada, but up to this point it has been often, from what I can tell, on a case-by-case basis, and those who are able to advocate for themselves are more likely to get the support that they need compared to someone who might not be able to advocate for themselves in the same way. We saw this day to day even before the COVID-19 pandemic, that some people need extra help. Unfortunately, when we're talking about government programs, they can be quite complex. When we're talking about utilities and whatever else you might need in your day-to-day life, it can become quite complex, and we need to make sure that we are supporting those people as well.

Now, once again I ask: why didn't this legislation come earlier? We've been calling for this for several weeks if not into a month or further now, and once again it's too little, too late because not only does this legislation not go far enough, but these families, once again, have already had those conversations with their utility providers, had those fights and hopefully were able to figure out a way, some kind of payment plan. But the fact is that this government didn't tell them early enough that there was going to be concrete action to support those Albertans, and now they're struggling with how they're going to pay for other things besides utilities because they had no real answers from this government.

Now, I definitely do have many questions here, and I will list some of them. Some of my colleagues may have touched on some of them, and I would appreciate that the minister would take some opportunities to answer those questions because they are important questions.

The Speaker: Standing Order 29(2)(a) is available. I see that the hon. Deputy Government House Leader has Standing Orders in his hands. I'm not sure if he wants to talk about some other thing, or 29(2)(a) is available to him if he wants to.

Mr. Schow: I appreciate the promotion there to House leader. Of course, I kid, Mr. Speaker. I would just rise quickly and respond to the member opposite's remarks. Standing Order 29(2)(a) gives me the opportunity to actually respond to the speech, and it doesn't necessarily have to be, as it appears to me in the standing orders,

relevant because frankly there wasn't a whole lot relevant in the previous member's speech that we just heard. On three occasions he was called to get to the point, but I just want to draw some specific attention to that.

It seems to be par for the course for some of the members across. It wasn't that long ago that we were debating a different topic of discussion, and I see the Member for Edmonton-West Henday on his feet there. You know, I had to point out the fact that . . .

The Speaker: Just to provide caution with respect to referring to the presence or the absence of any member of the Assembly.

Mr. Schow: Mr. Speaker, I am well aware of that standing order and would never do such a thing. I was simply referring to the fact that the member was standing but not entering or exiting the Chamber. I understand that, and I will make sure I keep my comments specific.

I do want to be very specific that I would like to see maybe a little more conversation about Bill 14 from the Member for Edmonton-West Henday when he spoke, which is why I rose on a point of order the first time, and then of course the hon. Associate Minister of Natural Gas and Electricity rose a second time, and then the Speaker rose a third time. Really, the point of my remarks is maybe to make a suggestion to the members opposite who aren't prepared to speak on a piece of legislation to maybe just not rise and do so. I did see that the Member for Edmonton-West Henday was reading off some speaking notes. Maybe he should go back and have a conversation with his co-ordinator. It's a position that I held myself for a time and took very seriously when I was writing speeches and preparing notes for the members that I worked with in this Chamber.

I think it's important because the members opposite come and they talk in this Chamber about Bill 14 and about how it seems to be rushed and they're not prepared. Well, that's the pot calling the kettle black, Mr. Speaker, given that some of the members opposite coming into this Chamber are not prepared to speak on this. Now, on the contrary . . .

Ms Sweet: Point of order.

The Speaker: A point of order has been called. The hon. the Member for Edmonton-Manning.

Point of Order Relevance Items Previously Decided

Ms Sweet: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise under 23(b), "speaks to matters other than the question under discussion . . . or a point of order . . . persists in needless repetition or raises matters that have been decided during the current session" or something that has already been decided by the chair.

Although I appreciate that the member would like to stand up and discuss whether or not he feels that individuals are prepared to speak or not or whether or not he agrees with what the members have been saying in the House, he may actually want to speak to Bill 14 under 29(2)(a) if he so chooses to. He may want to stop speaking about the fact that there has been a decision already made in front of this House in regard to the matter that he is already speaking to in regard to points of order and speak to something that's relevant to what the member actually said and not a point of order that he's trying to re-debate in front of the Speaker.

The Speaker: The deputy government whip.

Mr. Schow: Thank you. I do believe that in 29(2)(a) it is my ability to stand up and respond to the speech; 29(2)(a) doesn't have anything specific to being relevant to the bill at hand. Now, like I said at the beginning of my 29(2)(a), I'm happy to respond 50 per cent regarding the bill and 50 per cent regarding the speech because that's about the same courtesy the Member for Edmonton-West Henday gave. I don't see this as a point of order. What I see this as is a matter of debate.

The Speaker: Thank you for both of your interjections.

Are there others that perhaps would like to enlighten the Chamber?

Seeing none, Standing Order 29(2)(a) refers to a brief period not exceeding five minutes, where a member shall provide a brief question or a comment on matters relevant to the speech and allow members to respond to each. All hon. members will know that this Speaker and previous Speakers have allowed a fair latitude on what a brief question or comment might entail.

I think there's one thing that we can all agree upon this afternoon, and that is that this posturing around relevance is not leading to positive matters of debate. I think it's reasonable, just as the Speaker ruled previously, that it's important that we keep our comments relevant to the subject at hand. And like the previous speaker had been encouraged to do, I will do the same and encourage the hon. Member for Cardston-Siksika to keep his comments perhaps a little bit more relevant to the bill.

Debate Continued

Mr. Schow: Most certainly, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate your ruling on that, so I will get to the point. I think it's important that we recognize the importance of this piece of legislation, Bill 14, recognize that there is value in helping Albertans through this very difficult time. I've had a number of constituents reach out to me and explain to me that things are tough for them. Any way that we can, you know, lend a hand up and help those that need it at this time, we're more than happy to do so. I see that value in Bill 14, especially, you know, when we're talking about things like deferrals.

I do really appreciate the work put forward by the Associate Minister of Natural Gas and Electricity. This is his first bill. It's a bill of significant value to this Chamber and to Albertans, and I applaud him for his effort on this and for the conversations and the consultations that he's been doing with Albertans across the province to ensure that as we all work together through this very difficult time, we're lending a hand to Albertans as much as possible.

With that, Mr. Speaker, I will conclude my remarks. I appreciate the opportunity to respond to the Member for Edmonton-West Henday.

The Speaker: Hon. members, Standing Order 29(2)(a) is available for another minute and a half if anyone would like to provide a question or comment. I see the hon. Member for Calgary-South East has risen.

Mr. Jones: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I just wanted to read some of my favourite parts of the bill because I'm concerned that some members may not have read it. "The Electric Utility Payment Deferral Program is established to permit enrolled electricity customers to defer the payment of certain amounts on electricity bills that are due in the deferral period in accordance with section 5." For clarity, section 5 is also within the bill. It's not in Service Alberta or Education.

4:40

If we jump along, there's another key paragraph you should read. Gas utility payment deferral program. "The Gas Utility Payment Deferral Program is established to permit enrolled gas customers," electricity and gas, "to defer the payment of certain amounts on gas bills . . ." – not Service Alberta, Education; I just want to be clear that it's actually a utility payment deferral program – ". . . that are due in the deferral period in accordance with section 15," another page you'll have to read, "and repay the deferred amounts over the repayment period in accordance with section 16." I'm sure that if you were to ask, the associate minister would be happy to set up a reading of the bill. Just an idea.

Thank you. [interjections]

The Speaker: Order.

Hon. members, there's still a little bit of time remaining in Standing Order 29(2)(a).

Seeing no one else, is there anyone else wishing to join in the debate of second reading of the bill? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora has risen.

Ms Hoffman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker and to members for the opportunity to debate this bill. While I know that some people feel like we might be belabouring the process, let me remind all of us that this bill was introduced a day ago and that it is definitely standard practice that bills have a few days of consideration. When we made the exception to rush Bill 10, as we were told by the government here in Alberta that it was absolutely necessary, and we agreed to put up fewer speakers and move more quickly because it was seen as such an urgent, pressing matter – and I agree; a state of provincial public health emergency is absolutely an urgent, pressing matter – and we expedited the process, there were a number of errors in that bill, errors that we flagged in the brief debate but that the government didn't have an opportunity to fix.

So let me sincerely say here at the beginning of second reading that we are going to flag some errors. I don't need our amendments to be accepted. I'm fine if the government wants to make the amendments, but there are some challenges in this bill. If this bill is indeed intended to help Albertans, I think that there are significant improvements that could be made to this bill to make that the outcome. I certainly welcome the associate minister, the minister, and any member of the government caucus to consider the flashlight we're trying to shine on some areas in this bill and to find ways that we can make it better. That is our job in this Assembly, to bring our best work here, to bring it forward, and to contribute on behalf of the folks who have put their trust in us to come here, to fight for them, and to try to make Alberta and the services that the government provides in the province of Alberta serve them in a way that supports them and their families.

As it relates to Bill 14, the Utility Payment Deferral Program Act, again, I want to say that I appreciate that the title is very directly linked to the intended outcome of this bill. Perhaps it would be more clear if it was called the "short-term deferral program," but fine. I don't need to fester over that. It has also been made very clear that this bill has a very specific start point and a very specific end point. I have concerns, as have been raised by some of my colleagues, and I imagine maybe members of the government have concerns about this as well in what appears to be a very short period of time for this deferral, beginning March 18, ending on June 18.

I fear that we may be in a position where we need to resume the House and amend what is clearly a very well-intended piece of legislation because we didn't think about the fact that this public health crisis, even though global reports everywhere say that it's

going to last a lot longer than a few months – here we are, closer to June 18 than we are to March 18, making a decision about this bill at this point in time, when we're already slightly more than halfway through the period in which this deferral period is allowed. That's probably the first obvious gap in terms of the deferral period, which is outlined in definition 1(b), as is on page 3 of the hard copy of the bill for those who are following along.

I think that this very specifically relates to a question of why it is that the government chose to put in this time period, why they chose to do it now, when many people have likely already paid their bills for a significant portion of the time that this period of deferral is in place for, why it is that we are doing this in this way at this time. That's sort of the number 1 question I have.

Number 2 would be on those who did make the very difficult decision to prioritize their utility bills over other expenses for their families. I regularly hear from parents who say: you know, I'd like to be able to buy a Chromebook. I appreciate that the minister talks about all of the lending that's been happening by schoolboards and the Métis Nation and other organizations throughout our province, and I want to commend them for that. Most schools that I've talked to have about enough devices, in elementary schools, anyway, for about a quarter – a quarter, a third, somewhere in that range – of the kids that go to that school, so lending out all of the devices that they have still means that there are a number of kids that don't have those devices.

A lot of families, even families who might not be considered the lowest income, have said to me: "You know, this is a particular hardship for us right now. We might have a couple of computers in our house, but we have more than that number of people working in our house right now. We have parents who are working from home, we have older children, and we have younger children. We'd like to be able to have everyone be contributing and productive in their day." I'm certain that the orders given by the minister convey that expectation. I have parents who say to me: "But I have bills coming in. I've been paying those bills." They've been paying their utility bill, because they didn't know that this was coming, and put off buying some of those other things, or they bought them on credit.

This is something I hear about often: buying a Chromebook, a couple of hundred bucks, on credit. But a couple of hundred bucks is probably less than what many people's utility bills are. They've been buying things on credit so that they could pay their utility bills. Those bills go back to March 18. Can they contact their utility company and say, "Actually, I want to get that payment back, and I want to be able to apply that to my credit card, that has an interest rate on it growing"? That is one of the questions that I hope this government has considered: people who have already made these payments and are incurring debt in other areas because they put their utility bill, this signed commitment, a contract that they made with their utility provider, as one of their highest priority bills to be able to literally keep the lights on and the power flowing in their houses. I think that is one fair question.

I imagine somebody over there will probably pop up under 29(2)(a) and tell me about their resumé or criticize something that I've said in this speech, but I hope that they will also consider, if they do choose to do that, speaking to the content of the questions that we are asking here today. One of them is: what about those who've paid their bills between the March 18 period and today, and can they get that money back and apply it to other things that they have and defer that payment?

I don't love the deferral concept, to be honest. I'd much rather that we see some of the more – the deferral, in my opinion and, I imagine, that of many, is about, you know, kicking the can down the road, dealing with something later. Honestly, a lot of it

compounds, too. I, like many of my colleagues, would much prefer that we either see a combination of deferral and rebate or some kind of combination that reduces the actual bills rather than just delaying them. As we've seen, there is in this bill a clear period in which the deferral ends and also a clear period in which the time for payment must resume, that being June 18, 2021.

I don't even necessarily feel confident calling it a reprieve, because it is essentially just delaying something to a point later, but it feels like a short-term reprieve. It feels like you can catch your breath for a few months, and, yes, you will have to pay for it later but in a way that gives you a little moment of pause.

So those are some of my earliest questions in this regard.

I think that for most households, or many households, anyway, in Edmonton-Glenora, the riding which I have the honour of representing, people tell me that their total utility costs are somewhere like \$300, \$400 a month. I think a lot of those people would love to see work done in this bill or in other bills, if the minister is so inclined – no time like the present – to reduce some of those tie-in fees, to reduce some of the extraordinary pressures. I was just talking to a constituent yesterday who said: "My consumption has gone down, and my bill has gone up. This is crazy. At a time when I'm doing everything I can to reduce costs in my life and what is in my control is going down, the overall cost is still going up."

I wish that we had some initiatives in this bill, as it relates to utility costs, that were focused on that, focused on actually causing some longer term reprieve for consumers. And, of course, a lot of us are talking about residential consumers, but there are many small commercial consumers as well.

4:50

When I've talked to some business owners in my riding, some of whom are closing – let's be frank – they say: if I access this reprieve, if I delay payments, I'm delaying the payments to, hopefully, at some point make a fraction of the money that I was making before to give it to the utility companies, to give it to my landlord, and I will be further behind than I am today. So they're making the decision, a number of them, to close prematurely, not because they want to but because they feel like it's delaying them having to pay more in a short period of time. I really do have to say that I wish this bill was something about making utilities more affordable for all Albertans. I think that's something that I would be very enthusiastic to vote for.

The reason why we're asking these questions is because I think that generally the bill is probably better than not having the bill, but I think the bill can be far better than that. I think the bill can actually take a number of steps to actually make life more affordable and specifically make utilities more affordable for residential and commercial consumers.

I want to talk about another section of the bill. This one is much further in. Section 28, Immunity for the Crown, goes on to say:

No action may be brought against the Crown claiming compensation for any real or perceived loss or damage resulting from the coming into force or the implementation of this Act or amendments to this Act or any regulations made or [proposed] to be made under this Act.

This one is interesting to me because it does definitely give me a little bit of a flashback to what was done, in the inverse, around the Enron clause as it relates to a number of changes that were made through deregulation years ago. So that's interesting. But more immediately it made me think of the small-business owners that I've been talking to who are getting ready to reopen their businesses and are nervous. Without having sector-specific guidelines and

directions and support for how to safely reopen their businesses, they're afraid of what their liabilities are.

One, for example, is a hairdresser. We talked to a number of them earlier this week. A hairdresser said: what's my liability if somebody contracts COVID in my place of business as a result of the government saying that we can reopen, and can the government give us any assurances that we won't have liability as it relates to that if something happens in our state of business? So far we've heard from the government deafening silence on that issue, for example. I find it intriguing that the government is very keen to give themselves the ability to have immunity of the Crown when it comes to this piece of legislation that they're bringing forward. I appreciate that they're writing it in such a way that, I imagine, I hope, the intent is so that utility companies can't sue the government. I hope that that's the intent. But what about all the other types of organizations that are out there right now taking new and increased risks?

In my own riding I love the 124th Street farmers' market. It opens next week, on the 14th. Typically there are probably 1,500 people there buying things on a typical Thursday night. It might even be more now. But there are a lot of people, more than 50 at a time – I'll guarantee you that – walking through the stands buying things and socializing, literally rubbing shoulders with one another. They are trying to take a number of measures to reduce the risk, but again the government hasn't put any guidelines out there to tell them if the risk-aversion techniques are, one, effective enough and, two, if they have increased liability if people contract something related to the public health crisis that we are all in as a result of the essential businesses being expanded.

If the government were to give immunity to those types of businesses, I would have greater understanding for why they feel so keen to give themselves immunity in this bill. I'm not opposed to immunity in this bill, but I find it interesting that the government thinks it's worthy of immunity, and it hasn't done anything to protect these other types of entrepreneurs in our communities who feel that they're taking on increased risk following the government's guidelines. There really aren't sector-specific controls being put in place to help them find a way to reduce the risk. Again, I think there are a lot of things that could be done in Bill 14, Utility Payment Deferral Program Act, to actually make it meet the needs of more Albertans.

I also want to comment on a piece that was highlighted earlier, the interest rate piece. I think that there is the potential that there could be risk tied to that, maybe not risk but rewards, for some folks in the sector to be able to borrow and make a profit at the cost of this legislation. Is that really who we should be focusing our efforts on right now, when we're bringing in legislation, or should it be everyday families? I would like to say that I hope that it would be everyday families.

Some of the questions that we want to raise. How are the transmission costs to be handled? That was one of the pieces I was saying about the constituent I spoke with yesterday, who wanted to know why it was that even though her use had gone down, her costs had gone up. Of course, a piece of that is related to transmission costs. We also understand that there hasn't been extensive consultation. I would be happy to have that point corrected under 29(2)(a) if there has been, but it doesn't seem that there has been at this point.

The Speaker: Standing Order 29(2)(a) is available. I see the hon. Minister of Culture, Multiculturalism and Status of Women has risen.

Mrs. Aheer: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, and thank you very much for the comments. I hope I can provide a little bit of clarity, and I'm sure the minister will be able to provide more. I just wanted to reiterate the importance that the bill was actually announced on March 18. It was very, very important for us to make sure that this information went out as soon as possible, realizing that businesses would be impacted. It's also retroactive. So there is an opportunity for businesses, especially small businesses. These are the fabric of our province, and we have to make sure on many, many levels that they have access to this information and be able to do the deferrals.

I can speak from a very personal point of view in the sense of – and all of us are getting this in our offices – the difficulty that so many are going through. It's going to be a multilevel approach as to how this helps, and there's not just one right answer.

However, I just wanted to also address that the hairdressers want to be told how to run their businesses. I would suggest, Mr. Speaker, that I think it's a bit more of a collaborative discussion. We've had several town halls, and actually to your point: many hairdressers have actually called in with really amazing questions. The wonderful thing about the hairdressers' association in particular is that they actually have a provincial association. So what we're asking is that these associations and the sectors are able to help us build that. It would be an absolutely horrible thing to see a government impose the way that they believe that a business should be run when the sector actually knows better. I actually have complete faith in our sector, in the businesses, to be able to actually inform us as to how that looks.

As you know, there was a release of information on how to reopen your businesses with respect to COVID, and it's sort of a large, overarching document, Mr. Speaker, in order to help businesses that are in the phase 1 relaunch to be able to approach that from a common-sense perspective as to what works for them. However, having said that, a lot of questions came across the docket about how to do that, and I have to say a huge thank you and a shout-out to Dr. Hinshaw, who has been with us every single evening in these town halls to be able to address sector-specific questions, which has been absolutely amazing. She's very in tune with what's going on and extremely thoughtful and comprehensive in her answers, in making sure that folks understand that we're here for them, to help them know the information that is out there based on the best advice of our chief medical officer.

I just want to make sure: we would never presume to tell a business how they should open, but we certainly want to provide the best guidelines, based on Dr. Hinshaw's best advice, and best practices to help them. Based on the town hall feedback that we've had over the last few days, it's been a very successful and wonderful approach to have the industries, who know their sectors best – these are the experts; they know how to run their businesses – help us understand how best to support them.

Then I just wanted to make sure: standard legislation in utility legislation has the clause that you're talking about. I'm sorry. I'm not sure how much time I have left, but I would really, really like, Mr. Speaker – when the opposition was in government, they spoke about the Enron clause significantly. It caused them a great deal of problems because they were misinformed about that legislation. To continue to use that language for an industry that is working very, very hard to help keep people's heads above water at this time is completely inappropriate. We've had these debates over and over and over again, and I can quite frankly say that any industry, especially our electricity and natural gas industry, will not appreciate that information being brought up again, especially given the boondoggle that happened when the opposition was in

government with regard to the power purchase agreements and everything that happened with that.

5:00

How about we leave that behind and work with the sector right now to make sure that they're in the best position to help our businesses, who are struggling right now, to make sure that they have everything available to them to be successful? I, for one, am extremely grateful to be looking at the light at the end of this tunnel. If you are speaking to your constituents, if you are making time to talk to people, we are in desperate need to be back together as communities and a society in whatever way and in whatever capacity. I have complete faith in Dr. Hinshaw and the Premier to be able to direct us through this and make sure that all of the people in this province have the most safe and viable ways to begin their businesses again.

Thank you.

The Speaker: Standing Order 29(2)(a) – that's unfortunate. The time has elapsed.

Is there anyone else wishing to speak to second reading? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood.

Member Irwin: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's an honour to rise and speak in this House, as it always is an honour, this time to Bill 14. Before I do that, I would just like to again, as I like to do before speaking in the House, thank all of our front-line workers and our essential workers, who, we know, as we speak are doing so much for all of us.

I think as well about all the workers that we've heard from, many of whom are preparing to transition to go back to work, including barbers and hairstylists, as the hon. Minister of Culture, Multiculturalism and Status of Women has just alluded to. Certainly, we've heard from hundreds – and I can truly say hundreds – of those folks who feel they haven't been consulted with and who do very much, as I've been asking about in question period the last two days, hope that they will get some specific guidelines.

But let's get to the bill at hand, Bill 14. What does Bill 14 do? Well, it does allow for the deferral of utility bills, but as we've heard from many of my esteemed colleagues already today, we are quite concerned that this bill does not go far enough. I very much appreciate the comments of my colleagues, particularly our critic for this area, the Member for Calgary-McCall. I know that he as well as our leader has read this legislation with a fine-tooth comb, and rightly so. We do have a number of questions that I'll be repeating and a few others that I would like to raise as we go through second reading here.

Now, we know that the bill, as it states in front of us, allows customers to defer their payments until June. As many folks have mentioned, we know that many Albertans are struggling right now. We hear from them daily. I hear every day from folks who are struggling, including in my own riding of Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood. Many of you have heard me speak in this House about the incredible diversity that I'm able to represent in my riding.

You know, one of the toughest parts, I think, of this job is just hearing from folks who are struggling and hearing from folks who aren't sure how they're going to make ends meet – right? – and raising concerns, whether it's around the price of housing, whether it's around making rent payments, mortgage payments, all the fees that add up, including utility payments. We need to listen to those voices. One of the reasons why I got into politics was to ensure that I was sharing those voices in this House and to ensure that vulnerable Albertans are always top of mind when we debate legislation such as this Bill 14, that we have in front of us.

You know, my colleague from Calgary-McCall noted, shared in his comments that we know that many families in the months to come are going to be struggling greatly to make ends meet, yet the UCP in their approach to this bill are kind of operating from a stance that things will be back to normal in two months' time – I always hate this idea of referring to normal, because what is normal? – again this idea that things will be back on track in two months. As much as I would like to believe that we can be in a place of normalcy or whatever sort of word you'd like to use, I just don't think that we'll be able to get there in two months.

My point in saying that is that we need a longer relief period for Albertans. We need a longer relief period for my constituents. I know that my neighbours in my neighbourhood of Parkdale tell me that they are struggling. You know they are struggling right now. They're out of work. My neighbour is in construction. He said that things are just so slow right now. He's in his 60s, his late 60s, and should be close to retirement but, unfortunately, won't be. This is someone who has given so much back to our province. I hope that we can think about folks like him as we're considering legislation such as this bill. I mean, keep in mind that you can listen to voices like my neighbour, and you can also listen to voices like that of the Calgary Chamber of commerce, who from a very different position have stated that it could take the economy 18 months to recover. So, again, let's think about the long-term strategy here.

I've spoken about economic recovery. In fact, just yesterday I talked about how we need to ensure that the economic recovery that this government undertakes is one that works for everyone, and then specifically I talked about bringing a gender-based intersectional lens to economic recovery because we know that this recession is different. We know that historically recessions have hit men the hardest. Again, there's a body of evidence; it's not just me making that up. There's a big body of evidence to support that. This time around it's different, the way that heavily women-focused industries have been hit the hardest.

To bring it back to the bill for my esteemed colleagues, I share this because we really need to consider, you know, those who are struggling, for instance, in this case to pay their bills, many women who are struggling with child care, with rent, with other bills such as utilities. Again, I just really want to make sure that we're bringing that intersectional lens not just to the issue of economic recovery but to any legislation that we bring forward, and I do hope that this government – I know the status of women minister has mentioned gender-based analysis and an intersectional lens before, so I hope she's pushing that in cabinet.

Now, I think it's also important, you know – again, I'm sort of focused on an evidence-based approach here – that we consider what other jurisdictions are doing. We see in Bill 14 that Alberta is essentially offering deferrals while other provinces are actually directly – directly – providing relief to consumers, actually helping families cover the costs of mounting utility bills. This is why we're encouraging the UCP to do the same, and my colleague from ...

Ms Hoffman: Be like Doug Ford.

Member Irwin: That's right. Interesting. I hate to praise – the Member for Edmonton-Glenora mentioned Doug Ford from Ontario. You know, I don't see eye to eye with him on a lot of issues, but there's an example where direct relief is being provided. I'll talk about Ontario in a moment. Thank you, Member.

As my colleague from Calgary-McCall has stated in some of his comments to the media, you know, we want Albertans to be actually helping to stimulate their local economies by spending their money in stores and restaurants as all those places of business reopen, right? We relaunch the economy by ensuring that our citizens have

money in their pockets, and this is, again, where other jurisdictions and what their approach is really need to be considered by all the members in this House.

What does British Columbia do? B.C. Hydro provides relief to customers who've lost their jobs or are unable to work. They have a customer crisis fund in place. Small businesses that have been forced to close due to COVID will have their power bills forgiven for three months, but they've also halted all service disconnections for nonpayment and cancelled all nonemergency planned power outages.

5:10

My esteemed colleague from Edmonton-Glenora mentioned Ontario. Ontario has taken some really interesting approaches as well. Customers won't be paying peak energy prices regardless of the time of day. We know that there can certainly be ups and downs, for sure, when it comes to energy prices. Ontario has also extended its low-income energy assistance program, LEAP, by providing an additional \$9 million to customers, again directly to stop bills.

I'll just give one more example, and that's Saskatchewan. Saskatchewan has stopped all collection activity. They've stopped disconnections of residential power services for nonpayment, and they're not installing devices that would limit any sort of electrical supply for those who are in arrears. My point is that there is a whole heck of a lot of evidence in other jurisdictions to show how those provinces, provinces with Conservative governments in power, are directly providing relief to customers.

An Hon. Member: It takes courage.

Member Irwin: Yeah. It does take courage, and it takes some foresight because we are in this House talking nonstop about economic recovery, and there are concrete measures to ensure that we are putting money in the pockets of consumers. As one of my colleagues mentioned – I think it was Edmonton-Glenora – you know, we'd just really like to see in this bill that we're looking at affordability for all Albertans.

This brings me to another concern, that this bill actually seems to help the companies a lot. It allows utility companies to borrow interest-free loans and then later recoup deferred utility fees with interest through special charges on customer bills. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Strathcona, our leader, talked about this as well, the concern that, again, you know, this is sort of a trickle-down approach, giving money to the corporations. I mean, corporations are not your constituents. Your constituents ... [interjection] Well, if they are, okay. We'll have another conversation about that there, Member.

We've got a number of lawyers in our caucus who have spoken far more eloquently about this than I could, just this whole liability piece as well: it makes consumers liable. We should be supporting people, people before profits. Why are we bolstering multibillion-dollar companies when we could be helping Albertans directly instead? Again, I've heard from those Albertans, my constituents. That's why I'm in this House today – right? – to ensure that we can provide them some sort of direct relief. I'm fearful – I'm fearful – that this legislation will not get us there.

The long-term costs, the long-term costs of not supporting folks who need that relief, will add up. Again, we've seen this sort of short-sightedness from this government on a number of decisions, talking about cutting EAs, as an example. We know and the studies show, with my own personal anecdotes of having been a teacher and seeing how important an educational assistant can be in a student's life, that cutting off that support at this point will cost us so much more in the long term. Just one example of many.

Again, one of the other big concerns we see in this piece of legislation – I have read it. I’m certainly not an expert, and there are a few things that I had to have explained to me. I don’t mind admitting that. One of the things that I can see clearly through this – pardon the pun – is the lack of transparency. You know, we raised a similar concern, in fact, when we talked about Bill 10, the lack of transparency, the lack of clarity in that piece of legislation. We have similar concerns with this one, and this is why, as our leader talked about, we will be introducing a number of amendments. The concern, of course, like with previous bills, is that those amendments won’t be supported by this government. We saw that with Bill 10.

We warned this government about our clear concerns around overreach on Bill 10, but they didn’t listen. Then what happened? Oh, gosh, a week or two later we, all of us at least on our side, received hundreds of e-mails and letters of concern about that bill. And then even folks like John Carpay shared their concerns about the legislation. That seemed to be enough to get this government and this Premier to recognize the lack of constitutionality in that piece of legislation, sure enough – yeah, sure enough – bringing it back to the drawing board.

So I want to encourage the members opposite to avoid a similar debacle and to consider our well-reasoned amendment which will be coming forth on this piece of legislation. Let’s get it right while we’re in this House. Let’s get that piece of legislation right.

Now, I want to as well just raise a couple of the other questions that I’ll put out there and that I hope – you know, we haven’t heard a lot from the members opposite on this piece of legislation, so I’m hoping that by raising some of the questions, we will be able in committee to get some answers. I hope folks are judiciously taking notes. One of those questions is around transmission costs. How will those be handled? It does not seem to be fully explicit within this piece of legislation.

The consultation piece is a big one. I feel always a sense of *déjà vu* because, you know, even just yesterday talking about Bill 13 and the concerns around lack of consultation, I know on that one, the Emergency Management Amendment Act, I believe it was called, just off the top of my head, my esteemed colleague from Calgary-Buffalo had been on the phone nonstop on that piece of legislation, really trying to hear from municipalities. In fact, we . . .

The Speaker: Standing Order 29(2)(a) is available if anyone has a brief question or comment for the hon. Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood, who not only is a gifted orator but I also understand a very skilled rollerblader and dancer. The hon. Member for Edmonton-City Centre.

Mr. Shepherd: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I was also enjoying the comments from my colleague for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood, much as I also enjoyed some of her roller dancing as was displayed on Instagram. Perhaps, as she had the opportunity to, I think, wrap that up in a rather stylish manner, she’d like to do so with her remarks now as well.

Member Irwin: Wow. I wonder if that’s the first time “roller dance” has been recorded into *Hansard*. We’ll have to check that.

Yes. Thank you for your support on that one. Yeah. I was in the middle of talking about consultation, and I had just shared my concerns around previous pieces of legislation that this government has brought forth. I had just mentioned my colleague from Calgary-Buffalo and the amount of consultation that we know he did on Bill 13, the Emergency Management Amendment Act. We had in fact introduced an amendment yesterday that was suggested by a key stakeholder, the city of Calgary. I give that example to sort of pose

to the members opposite, you know, again: who was fully consulted on this piece of legislation?

From what I gather from my colleague from Calgary-McCall, there don’t seem to be a lot of clear answers when it comes to consultation.

Mr. Sabir: No consultation.

Member Irwin: No consultation, yeah, on this piece of legislation.

Again, we’re talking about a piece of legislation that, you know, maybe there aren’t thousands at home currently watching this debate, but it will impact them. It will absolutely impact them. Yes, I get the need to move forward legislation in a timely manner during this pandemic, but again, we’re not comfortable pushing something forward without getting answers to some of these questions.

Transmission costs, consultation, and a couple of other questions I just want to get on the record. The precaution around recovering funds through a rate rider: we would just like to get a little bit more clarity around the specifics there. Does the government have an estimate of the total funds that it expects to be recovered through this way? Again, the concerns around the corporations that I raised in my previous comments: how is the government preventing utility companies from borrowing interest-free loans and charging deferrals in the weighted average cost of capital to consumers? Of course, the concern there being that they’re not a risk, that companies could potentially profit.

I know some folks in this House have spoken to the importance of the industry. Absolutely. We’re not slugging the industry. We are reiterating the importance of directly providing relief and support to consumers because these are our constituents, these are the folks we represent, and these are the ones calling our offices, writing our offices, sharing their concerns about affordability right now. If we have an opportunity to get this legislation right and to help a number of Albertans at a time when so many are struggling, then let’s do that.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

5:20

The Speaker: Standing Order 29(2)(a) is available. I did see the hon. Member for Lethbridge-East earlier. I’m not sure if he still has a question or comment. There’s approximately a minute and 30 seconds left. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora has a brief question or comment.

Ms Hoffman: Yeah. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker and to the member. I know the member has a background as a social studies teacher. In her speech she talked about citizens being constituents, not entities that aren’t citizens, and I was wondering if she maybe wanted to expand on that as it directly relates to her speech.

Member Irwin: Yeah.

Ms Hoffman: In about a minute.

Member Irwin: Oh, sure.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Member Irwin: Thank you.

Mr. Long: You’re working overtime.

Member Irwin: Yeah. This just seems unfair. No, that’s great.

I know there are some other members in this House who were also teachers. You know, I’ll have to have a conversation with one

of the members from the UCP who mentioned that corporations are his constituents. That's a little bit alarming.

Of course, you know, I'm here to serve the people. Really, I mean, I think we all got involved in politics because we're here for service and we're here to listen to our constituents. It's been tough. Honestly, it's been challenging for the last number of weeks for my staff and me trying to manage our correspondence. It's tough for me, and I know I'm a bit of an emotional person from time to time. Hearing from so many folks who are absolutely – I had people who were facing evictions, right? I had folks who absolutely don't know how they're going to pay their bills this month.

The Speaker: Hon. members, is there anyone else wishing to join in the debate? The hon. Member for Edmonton-City Centre.

Mr. Shepherd: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's always a pleasure to have the opportunity to rise and join in the debate in the House, and I hope that other members of the Assembly also can take some pleasure when I do. We'll see if that proves true today. Today we are looking at, of course, Bill 14, the Utility Payment Deferral Program Act. Recognizing that this is something that the government did reference, I believe, as far as I could find, back on about March 18, as was noted by the Minister of Culture, Multiculturalism and Status of Women – the government did indicate at about that time that it intended to bring forward a 90-day deferral program for both individuals and businesses – we find that today, now, on May 7, about a month and a half after that was mentioned, we have the bill laid before the House, and we have the opportunity to find out the details of how the government intends to roll out this program.

Now, I appreciate that the government did make that announcement earlier, and indeed that provided some sense of the direction that the government intended to go. But I don't quite agree with what the minister was saying, that that was providing a lot of assurance or surety for Albertans, in that that announcement was made and then was followed by no detail until now, a month and a half later. Indeed, that is one of the concerns I would have in general as I talk about this bill, in particular the utility deferral bill, and sort of set up the context of that discussion about how this government has approached so many aspects of its response during this pandemic.

It seems to be rather fond of making the announcements, of making the proclamations, and giving a sense of what it intends to do, wishing to look somewhat heroic in that, but then it is quite light on the details and indeed takes quite a while to get those out. As we're seeing right now with much of the discussion we're having now about the reopening of the economy, of which this will be an important part, this utility deferral, which we are looking at today, again we have the government that wants to be very quick to make the announcements and be in front of the cameras and to talk about the wonderful things they're going to do, but then once people actually have questions about how that's going to take place, there's very scant detail available.

Indeed, when we start to talk to people and sort of ask them what kind of consultation went into that decision, there does not seem to be much. My concern is that at times what we have seen during this period of this pandemic, even as we have come into this House to debate pieces of legislation like this one before us today, this utility deferral, that at times this Premier and members of this government have seemed more interested in perhaps some of the political opportunities than in providing actual reassurance to the people of Alberta or taking steps that provide actual concrete relief as opposed to looking for the opportunities where there are to build up one's political advantage or appearance.

But today we have a bill in front of us that is part of what the government said that it would bring forward to respond, and we have the opportunity to look now at what is the actual support that this government is looking to provide to Albertans, individuals and businesses, in terms of a utility deferral. So what we have here is a bill that basically allows consumers and businesses that are using fewer than 250 megawatt hours at a specific site to defer their electricity bills between March 18 and June 18 of this year. Businesses that use fewer than 2,500 kilojoules can defer their gas bills for the same period. These deferrals are expected to be paid back, then, by June 18, 2021. So at its core that seems a reasonable provision. That's helpful. Now, as some of my colleagues have noted, a deferral is not necessarily always the most helpful.

Now, I recognize, of course, that as the government has said on many occasions, we have to – I believe the minister of natural gas himself was talking today about our fiduciary responsibilities versus our moral responsibilities. Fair enough. Those are obviously calculations that any government has to make. Now, as I think we've discussed many times in this House, my colleagues and I in the Official Opposition often disagree with how this government chooses to find that balance. Indeed, even before we got into this pandemic, we had many disagreements about how this government chooses to find that balance, and often it seems that this government is far more interested in their fiduciary responsibilities and the advantages they can convey to themselves and corporate friends as opposed to the moral responsibilities and how those apply to individual Albertans.

What we have here is a decision by this government that, in its view, the best way that it can use its fiduciary power, which is sizeable, the best way it can make use of the dollars it has at hand and, indeed, the money that it's able to loan is to provide that money to utility corporations, to provide that to these utility corporations in the form of an interest-free loan so that those corporations can then defer utility payments for individuals and businesses. Now, respectfully, that's not such a bad thing. I think we recognize that utility companies are businesses, and they don't necessarily have a lot of extra cash on hand either to be able to simply forgo being paid for a period of time, so I don't think it is unreasonable that the government would provide some form of a loan in order to ensure that they can continue to operate the company and provide the service, which indeed they do, which we all rely on.

Now, the concern that I do have is that these businesses are receiving these loans interest free for a deferral for individuals. Individuals will have to pay this money back. I can tell you, in my conversations with many business owners here within my constituency and in the surrounding area, that one of the concerns they raise is that deferrals on things like rent and utilities and these other costs don't do much good for them because the fact is that they are not earning any income right now with their business closed. So for them to come out of this, when they are operating their business again, simply with a larger load of debt does not bode well for the future of their business. That's not helping them.

But that aside, that is the direction this government has chosen to go, to go with a deferral of payments. They do not want to actually lower those costs or help pay for any of those costs. They feel that is not within their realm of fiduciary responsibility, and that is their choice to make. However, they are choosing to provide interest-free loans, so recognizing that these utility companies – they do not want to burden them with interest for doing this good deed of helping Albertans. And that is not sarcastic. I appreciate that they are helping, but the government feels they should not pay interest on that, but when that is used, then, to defer the payments for individuals, those individuals should pay interest on that deferral.

5:30

Here we are faced again, Mr. Speaker, with our question of where we weigh that balance between fiduciary responsibility and moral responsibility and indeed who we think is in need of greater assistance here. If it is fit for these companies not to pay interest on the loans that they are being provided to assist Albertans, why are we asking the Albertans who are being assisted to pay interest? These loans are there to protect the profits of these companies, that they are making. This is to ensure that everybody is kept whole, and that is a prudent and responsible thing for government to do in these situations. We've talked about that on the rent bill, and we talked about that in regard to evictions, and we talked about, yes, how we have to look at both sides of that equation and all of the commercial transactions which take part as part of keeping our society functional.

But in this case I do not understand why government feels that the corporation should not have to pay interest in this transaction but the consumer, the individual, and therefore their business should. So I would appreciate, perhaps when we have the opportunity, if we could get some clarification on that point, perhaps from the minister of natural gas, why he feels that that should be the case and indeed with whom he consulted in determining that that should be the case. I'm sure he has spoken with many natural gas companies. Of course, that is his job. Certainly, I have heard that he has spoken with many and that indeed he's been very present in that industry, and I commend him for that. That's an important part of his portfolio.

However, how many consumers were discussed? Which consumers were discussed? Did he speak with interest groups? Did he speak with nonprofit organizations who work with people who are low income? Which business associations did he speak with? Did he speak with the chambers of commerce in Edmonton and Calgary to get his views on how this would work and how this would affect the businesses involved? Did he speak with any of the local business associations? Perhaps some of the members of his caucus spoke with their local business associations and got their views on this system of deferrals and the fact that these businesses and individuals would indeed be paying interest on these deferrals to see how they felt and how they thought that might affect their business. I look forward to the opportunity perhaps to hear a bit more about that consultation process and how we came to this point in this decision.

Now, one of the other aspects about this that my colleagues have discussed and I would like to just touch on as well is the question of transparency about how these loans which are being afforded to these corporations are then being allocated and used. Now, as my colleagues have noted, the government here is exempting itself from all liabilities, which is always, I think, a reason to raise one's eyebrow. You don't exempt yourself from liabilities unless you're concerned that you actually have some, so I would be interested to know for what reasons the government feels it is exposing itself, that it might be sued here or that it might be on the hook, that it needs to pass a law saying that it can't be. I think all Albertans, indeed all folks within a democracy, have good reason to ask questions when government says: I'm about to take an action, and just in case I want to make sure that you know that I can't be held liable for anything that happens as a result of what I'm about to do.

If that's a contract being put in front of me, then I am going to ask some real questions about that and in particular that the government is exempting itself from any liabilities regarding the requirement to report on the loans or purchase of stock in any company involved under this act. Now, I would expect that if this is as simple and as innocent a transaction as this is supposed to be,

if this is simply the goodwill which government wants us to believe it is and which they've certainly portrayed this to the public as – this is the government simply stepping in to help in a difficult situation, to have the backs of Albertans, both as individuals and for their businesses – then there is nothing that should need to be hidden about the manner in which this is gone about.

What about these loans that we are making to these corporations on behalf, let's be clear, of the people of Alberta, to benefit the people of Alberta – what aspect of that transaction needs to stay hidden? What is the government concerned that people might see happening as part of this process, which, again, is supposedly benign, which is all about simply helping utility companies to help Albertans out of good faith and goodwill, making sure that they can stay whole in the process of doing so? This is not supposed to be about profit. This is not supposed to be about anybody gaining any advantage because certainly, Mr. Speaker, I think you would agree and all members would agree that it would be in extremely bad taste. Not to suggest that is the case here, but if that were the case that there was some advantage or some profit being taken or that somebody was coming out further ahead as a result of this decision in this legislation in the midst of a global pandemic and something that is impacting the individual so personally and deeply – indeed, this could be an incredibly transformative thing. This could make or break people's businesses and indeed their own financial status.

That is not something where that should be the case, yet government is exempting itself from the requirement to report on these loans or the purchase of stock in a company under this act. I would be interested to hear from the minister or perhaps any other member that would like to provide some clarification on why this particular provision is here in this bill, because, again, we do not disagree with the overall principle.

Now, again, as I've said, we would perhaps strike a different balance between the fiduciary responsibility and the moral responsibility, as we've seen other jurisdictions do. As my colleague from Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood outlined, there are jurisdictions which have sought to actually relieve and just simply cover some of the cost, not create further debt for individuals, not charge them interest but simply lower their costs, ease their financial burden in the midst of this. That is not this government's choice. Fair enough. But I think we have some reasonable questions and reasonable concerns here, particularly given, at times, the lack of reasons this government has given Albertans in general to trust them.

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

Ms Pancholi: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I want to begin by expressing my appreciation for the comments from the Member for Edmonton-City Centre. He has a way of communicating the issues in such a very clear and compelling way, in particular that balance he was discussing between striking that fiduciary obligation that government has and the role that it has in acting on behalf of its citizens and as a public good with the moral obligations, right? I know we see very much through this pandemic the efforts to try to strike that balance, and as the member very appropriately mentioned, that is actually the very role of government, to strike that balance.

[Mr. Milliken in the chair]

Where that line is drawn is very key, and I think what I hear from my constituents and what I'm hearing from the comments from the member is that particularly at a time of unprecedented challenge, this is a time where the moral obligation becomes incredibly

compelling. We know that there are so many Albertans who are suffering extreme hardship, anxiety, stress. Indeed, what we should be primarily motivated about, with some parameters, of course, around our constraints – but moral obligation becomes, in my view, the most compelling perspective to take. I really appreciate the member for characterizing it in that way, which is very helpful for me as a member in this Legislative Assembly.

I'm wondering if the member would like to share and express some views from his constituents, who, I know – many of them, in the heart of the city of Edmonton, have varying degrees of supports available to them. Perhaps he's heard some stories from them about their need for, perhaps, government to take a more compassionate approach and why something like utility deferrals, which is something that – many of them may have already paid their utility bills and made some difficult choices themselves around how to reach that balance. Maybe he can talk about what he's heard from his constituents about how to strike that balance.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: I see the hon. Member for Edmonton-City Centre is rising to respond with about three minutes.

Mr. Shepherd: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to my colleague from Edmonton-Whitemud for the question. Indeed, throughout this pandemic I have heard from many constituents who have expressed many concerns going back to one of the initial points that we raised as the Official Opposition, that being around the concern around support and protection against eviction.

5:40

I represent an interesting constituency in that I have some of the most expensive condos in the city of Edmonton as well as probably some of the lowest rent apartments. But that said, I mean, even those folks that are living in those low-rent apartments are often individuals who are on extremely low income, individuals that are on AISH, individuals that are on income support and other forms of disability. Indeed, I heard from them very early on, with their concerns about whether there was going to be rental protection, whether there was going to be eviction protection for them. They had to live in a state of uncertainty and anxiety for quite some time before this government provided any assurance to them that it was indeed going to take action.

Now, we found ourselves in a similar situation here, where this was introduced in March and then we have waited a month and a half to see the government move forward and actually provide clarity on how it intended to enact this or what it was going to bring forward. Certainly, other of my colleagues have noted the many financial decisions Albertans have had to make in the meantime while waiting for this government to make that decision and provide that clarity.

As I was saying, again, it also comes down to a question of trust – this is maybe where the misunderstanding is – where this government seems to feel that simply because they say a thing, then Albertans should be able to relax and just say: ah, we can trust them; they've got this. But as other colleagues have noted, that has not been the case on so many things. I spoke the other day about the city charters and how those were torn up by this government though they promised not to. Others have spoken of how the Minister of Education promised that she would maintain all of the funding for schools, and then we saw that that was not, in fact, the case. It was less than two weeks before she then saw over 20,000 Albertans fired as a result of a decision she made to reduce that funding. So when it comes to questions like this, however altruistic the government's intents may be or that they may wish to claim they be, they have

not put us in a position where we feel it is – I don't think any Albertan says that they should be given the benefit of the doubt.

For us to stand and question that and to raise that in this House is not partisan, Mr. Speaker. That is us reflecting on the very clear decisions and impacts of what this government has notably done.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

Are there any other hon. members looking to join debate? I see the hon. Member for Edmonton-Manning has risen to speak.

Ms Sweet: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I thought I saw somebody from the government side jump up, but I guess I was wrong. I'll be really quick. I think that, you know, many of my colleagues have already addressed many of the concerns or questions, I guess, that we have around Bill 14, and I know we have lots more time during Committee of the Whole and other stages for us to continue to have these discussions. As my colleagues have already said, we will have some amendments that we would like to bring forward.

Now, I think the one piece that I did want to touch on that I do think is important that we continue to look at is that although I appreciate that the deferral program is being put in place – and we recognize why that's happening. I mean, there are a couple of key issues that I think are important that we highlight. The first one, obviously – and maybe the associate minister will be able to respond to this at a time when he closes the debate for second reading. Why does it only go to June 18? I think we recognize that, you know, yes, the province is making some moves to reopen the economy, and of course we need to get our economy moving, for sure, and get people back to work.

But we also recognize that we're in a recession right now and that there are concerns across the country and in Alberta around people being able to access employment. I don't know if June 18, in fairness, is going to be long enough. I don't think we know at this point, given the stages that we're going to have to go through to reopen the economy, what that will look like for people. For some people it may not be an issue, but for others I think there's some fairness in saying that maybe June 18 won't be long enough to be able to identify whether or not they're going to need to access this program. I know for myself – I mean, it's May. I got my utility bills today. I had to pay my utility bill today, which means my next one will come again on the beginning of next month. Well, if that's fair and what's happening for other people, they may not know by June 18 whether or not they're going to be able to pay their bills.

I also just want to highlight – and maybe the associate minister will be able to clarify this either today or when we move into Committee of the Whole – that when we look at other provinces and other jurisdictions across the country, we've seen a different mechanism used to support people in dealing with their utility payments. Many of those provinces have actually looked at giving finances directly to the citizens or paying their utilities on behalf of an individual citizen. Therefore, it's still going to the utility companies, but we're not expecting or loaning money to industry to offset the cost of these deferrals.

[The Speaker in the chair]

I think that when we start lending and creating loans for industry to be able to manage the deferral – and of course there's going to be an economic impact if people aren't able to pay these utility companies for their utilities – the issue with that is that if they are borrowing money from the province to offset what they are potentially estimating as having to be the deferral, they also then get to claim interest on the money that's sitting in their accounts while they're waiting to see if they have to access that deferral money. In fact, what is happening, then, is that we are seeing utility

companies actually making money off the public dollar when it's sitting in a bank account being a loan from the province.

So there's some question with that. Why would we be setting up a system that ultimately allows utility companies to generate income based on interest sitting in a bank account because the government has set up a loan system that allows that to happen? Or, as we see in other provinces, which may be why other provinces did this, they set up a system that paid utility bills on behalf of the citizens; therefore, not actually giving money, public tax dollars, to industry to create an income off of. I mean, it's a little bit ironic to me, given that this is a fiscally responsible Conservative government, that that would be a system that they would set up that would make sense, to be offsetting costs for industry to then make money off public money. It blows my mind, actually. I mean, it's not a very fiscally conservative model, I would say, of how to do things.

Some may say that it is another model that I will not use because I'm sure the associate minister will know exactly what word that would be. There is some inconsistency when we talk about free market and talk about the responsibilities of free market and what should happen with that and then see a government giving public money to create funds for themselves. I mean, I'd be very, very curious to hear from the associate minister about why that model was chosen. Who's actually benefiting from the deferral program? Although you will say that this deferral program is set up to help Albertans be able to manage, you know, the financial needs that they're going to have over the next few months due to unemployment, the real winner is actually the corporations that are benefiting from these loans. It's counterintuitive to me.

Maybe the associate minister could explain to me why you would set the system up this way. Who is actually going to benefit ultimately? Do we know how much money these corporations are going to make on interest alone from these loans that they will be receiving to help with the deferral program? Have we estimated or has the government estimated how much money they're going to need to provide for these deferral programs and where this money will go and who it will go to? And then what happens if that money isn't used? What if these utility companies borrow this money, create their loans, put them in the bank account, make a whole bunch of interest off it, and then go, "Well, actually, we didn't need it; it's fine; we didn't anticipate the amount of money that we actually needed; we overestimated"? Will that interest get paid back to the province, or will the companies get to hold the interest?

These are just some thoughts that I had. Of course, in Committee of the Whole we may have some suggestions on how to fix that problem, associate minister. It would be something that maybe he'd be willing to chat with me about offline, how maybe we should look at that. I think, for me, that's the big one. I'm a big believer that if you're going to do something for vulnerable Albertans – you know, corporations shouldn't benefit on the backs of Albertans. Let's just start there.

Just trying to think of anything else that we should highlight today or maybe we can get into when we get into Committee of the Whole. I think I'll leave it there. Maybe the minister would be willing to stand up and just answer a couple of questions. If he can't, that's fine. We can chat a little bit more as we move through the stages of the bill, but I think the interest piece will be very interesting to Albertans to know.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

5:50

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

Seeing none, is there anyone else wishing to join in the debate for second reading?

Seeing none, I am prepared to provide the opportunity to the Associate Minister of Natural Gas and Electricity to close debate.

Mr. Nally: Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank the hon. members across the aisle for some very insightful comments. A couple of them actually read the act, so that's wonderful. To their point, I will happily speak and meet with anyone on that side of the House that wants to come speak with me. I'll happily sit down outside of this House. I'd just ask that you read the act before then. We're not going to go into a lot of detail tonight. We're going to close debate tomorrow, hopefully, with a little luck. But I think they did bring up some good questions, and I think they brought up some insightful questions, not anything that we haven't considered or thought of. I would certainly be more than happy to get into a back and forth in Committee of the Whole.

Thank you very much.

[Motion carried; Bill 14 read a second time]

The Speaker: The hon. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mrs. Savage: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I stand up to move that the Assembly adjourn until 10 a.m. tomorrow, Friday, May 8.

[Motion carried; the Assembly adjourned at 5:53 p.m.]

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