



Province of Alberta

The 30th Legislature
Second Session

Alberta Hansard

Wednesday morning, May 27, 2020

Day 21

The Honourable Nathan M. Cooper, Speaker

Legislative Assembly of Alberta
The 30th Legislature
Second Session

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New Democrat: 24

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Legislative Assembly of Alberta

9 a.m.

Wednesday, May 27, 2020

[Mr. Milliken in the chair]

Prayers

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

Please be seated.

I see the hon. Minister of Energy has risen with a question or to speak.

Mrs. Savage: Well, thank you and good morning. I would rise to request unanimous consent of the Assembly that members may be able to sit, speak, and vote from any chair in the Assembly for today's sitting.

[Unanimous consent granted]

Orders of the Day

Government Bills and Orders

Second Reading

Bill 1

Critical Infrastructure Defence Act

[Debate adjourned March 2]

The Acting Speaker: I see the hon. Member for Spruce Grove-Stony Plain has risen to speak.

Mr. Turton: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is my honour to rise and speak in favour of this very important legislation. Before I go into detail on the contents of the Critical Infrastructure Defence Act, I would like to paint a picture of the events that are requiring this action from our government.

Earlier this year blockades across Canada held our national economy hostage. Key infrastructure across the country – rail lines, bridges, and construction sites – was blocked by small radical groups acting with the intent of shutting our economy down. The actions of these small groups with a radical agenda have sent shock waves through the economy and caused a fierce debate over the role of vital and important transportation corridors. The devastating impacts of this radical action on the blockades were felt deeply, including by the residents of Spruce Grove and Stony Plain. Hundreds of rail workers were laid off, and farmers were struggling to get their grain to market at a crucial time of the year.

In February Teck announced that they would be formally withdrawing their application for the \$20 billion Frontier mine project. In a letter to the federal minister of the environment Teck's CEO stated, "It is now evident that there is no constructive path forward for the project." The timing of this withdrawal was no coincidence. Investors in the natural resource industry are losing confidence in their ability to move forward on their projects even after they have met all the consultation and regulatory requirements to continue.

The withdrawal of the Frontier mine project holds a devastating cost for Albertans. Its construction alone was projected to create 7,000 good-paying jobs. Now, you heard that, Mr. Speaker: 7,000 jobs taken off the table in difficult economic times. Now, in the context of our current economic crisis the loss of this project and these jobs hurts even more. As our province is facing the worst economic conditions since the Great Depression, jobs from a large-scale project like the Frontier mine would have gone a very long way. The cancellation of the Teck mine project will also hurt many communities who are relying on oil sands development to increase their revenues and provide important services for families. Now, this includes the 14 First Nations communities close to the project who would have seen hundreds of jobs created and tens of millions in revenue through this mine project.

Mr. Speaker, this government has been committed to getting Albertans back to work since day one, and that's why the first priority of this new legislative session was to introduce measures that uphold the rule of law and create consequences for interfering with essential infrastructure here in our province. At its core the Critical Infrastructure Defence Act creates clear consequences for people who decide to block rail lines and other pieces of critical infrastructure. Now, the premise of this bill is quite simple. Obstructing or damaging critical infrastructure through blockades or protests is a specific criminal offence that results in a fine or jail sentence.

Now, under this bill essential infrastructure takes an extensive definition. This legislation applies to both privately owned and publicly owned infrastructure, supporting the rights of property owners and corporations alike. Pipelines, telecommunications infrastructure, railways, highways, refineries, and more are covered under this definition of essential infrastructure. Now, this is important, Mr. Speaker, as it ensures that radical protesters are not emboldened to interfere with infrastructure beyond the rail blockades that have so significantly affected this country in recent days and months.

At the core of Bill 1 is the creation of a new criminal offence for individuals and corporations who create blockades around critical infrastructure. It creates a criminal offence for anyone committing the following actions: one, wilfully entering an area containing essential infrastructure; two, wilfully damaging essential infrastructure; or three, wilfully interfering with the construction, maintenance, or operation of critical infrastructure. Bill 1 also makes aiding or counselling those who obstruct critical infrastructure an offence in and of itself. Targeting critical infrastructure also has serious consequences under this legislation. An individual who has committed this offence faces a fine of between \$1,000 and \$10,000 for the first offence. Repeat offenders face increased fines of up to \$25,000. Now, this bill also lays out the precedent of a term of imprisonment of up to six months. These measures send an important message to people who might try to hold up our economy. Interference and damage of essential infrastructure in this province are simply not acceptable.

Mr. Speaker, I am proud to be part of a government that is taking decisive steps to protect essential infrastructure from radical protesters, and I am proud to be part of a government that values and upholds the rule of law. I am certainly proud of a government that unequivocally puts the needs of Albertans and its families first. Bill 1 takes vital steps in protecting Alberta's interests, and it also sends a critical message to investors in times of uncertainty that Alberta is open and ready for business. In light of a lack of federal leadership the Critical Infrastructure Defence Act puts measures in place to support investor confidence when it is needed the most. It shows that our government of Alberta prioritizes order and is

willing to take action to counter the virtual anarchy that took place across Canada earlier this year.

Through common-sense measures this bill will also ensure that anyone responsible for interfering with essential infrastructure faces repercussions. Small radical groups should not have the ability to stall our economy and scare away investment, and there must be consequences to breaking the law. As we begin the long road to economic recovery, we simply can't afford to lose jobs for Albertans because of a small radical movement undermining confidence in our valued energy sector, and that's why I'm pleased to support this important piece of legislation.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

Hon. members, 29(2)(a) is available should anybody be wishing to speak. I see the hon. Member for Cardston-Siksika has risen.

Mr. Schow: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's great to be back in the Chamber this week. I'm grateful to be standing here to talk a little bit about Bill 1, the Critical Infrastructure Defence Act, and its importance to all of us and our constituents, particularly the future of Alberta.

I was particularly interested by the member's remarks of how important it is to him personally. I've had some experiences myself in my own constituency with troubles where there have been blockades of critical infrastructure, particularly during critical times for the agriculture industry. I'm curious to know if the member could maybe elaborate a little bit more about some of the effects of some of these kinds of blockades and some of this social disruption and what effect it's had on his constituents and maybe even people that he knows personally.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you.

The hon. Member for Spruce Grove-Stony Plain to respond, with about four minutes remaining.

Mr. Turton: Awesome. Well, thank you very much, and thank you to the member for the question. You know, for example, one of the main railways that goes from Edmonton to the coast, the west coast, runs right through my riding. Unfortunately, just about a mile or two east of my riding, the riding of Lac Ste. Anne-Parkland and Acheson, we had one of those protests. Every day that rail line that runs through Spruce Grove-Stony Plain is one of the busiest rail lines in all of Canada. It carries goods, products, and services – quite frankly, many of my residents work at plants, loading the trains – and those are going out for export, creating millions of dollars of economic value to my area and to the province. It was awkward, and it was strange that as that protest was going on, for the first time that I can remember, living in Spruce Grove – I was there since high school – you see the tracks empty. You don't see any trains going through.

I mean, it was always a bone of contention when cars were stopped trying to get around the riding, but you see that it was quite noticeable. And it wasn't just the – for a little bit, it was kind of humorous to see that: oh, we can get across town; we don't have to stop at the tracks. But every train that did not go down those tracks, that did not go to the ports in B.C., that was not importing goods and products: that was jobs on the line. There were families being affected.

9:10

You know, there was a clear economic damage being done by not being able to export, and when you see, for example, the gloating or some of the satisfaction that some people had in terms of shutting down the economic livelihoods of people in my riding when all they

wanted to do was work – all they wanted to do was provide for their families so that they could take their kids to soccer practice and maybe go on a vacation, and they were shut down. As we're dealing now with shortages of medical supplies, for example, around the country, I mean, those trains carry medical supplies. They carry products around the country, so there's no economic benefit at all of shutting down some of the key pieces of infrastructure that we have. So in my riding, yeah, there was a lot of dissatisfaction. There was a lot of anger about the fact that their livelihoods were being affected by the lack of rail traffic.

So I am proud as an Albertan and as a member of this Legislature to be standing up here and ensuring that these types of protests that cause so much economic hardship can never happen again. I'm proud of this government for putting forth this legislation, and I'm looking forward to potentially seeing this pass here in this Legislature so it can, you know, cause an extreme benefit both to the economy of Albertans and to the well-being of families in my riding.

Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

Are there any other hon. members wishing to speak? I see the hon. Member for Vermilion-Lloydminster-Wainwright has risen to speak.

Mr. Rowswell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate the opportunity to speak in this debate over Bill 1, the Critical Infrastructure Defence Act. I'm sure we can all agree that in its first few months 2020 has proven unimaginably difficult. It is hard to believe that so much has happened in the few months since the bill was first tabled.

In the beginning of the year a clear attack on the rule of law unfolded across this country. For weeks radical activists constructed blockades and shut down rail lines and damaged the economy. Tensions mounted, Mr. Speaker, over the future of resource development projects in this province, the value of job creation, consultation with indigenous communities, and good environmental practices were being shouted down by the voices of a radical few. This is simply unacceptable. This government has made every effort since taking office to uphold the rule of law and support our natural resource sector; however, the same cannot be said for the federal authorities.

The decision by Teck to withdraw from the Frontier mine proposal in February this year simply underlines the problem. Small groups of lawbreakers have been able to slow down the economy and create uncertainty for investors. Part of the concern by Teck around proceeding with the mining project was the safety of its workers. As a company that frequently ships by rail, they expressed concerns with the lack of certainty that rail workers would be safe if recent protests set a precedent for unlawful blockades.

During the blockades Albertans watched in disbelief at virtual anarchy on the rail lines across our country, with little discussion of consequences for those in clear violation of the law. The blockades and protests that took place earlier this year also highlight that decisive action is necessary to maintain economic functions and investor confidence. The central infrastructure in Alberta cannot afford to be targeted and held up. Railways, pipelines, and highways are essential to the key industries in this province. Each day that railcars or transport trucks are slowed, Albertan businesses lose money and jobs are lost. The lack of federal decision-making throughout the blockades unfortunately sent a clear message. It showed that there aren't sufficient safeguards protecting the best interests of workers, investors, and communities in this province when it comes to protests targeting essential infrastructure.

Hard-working Albertans should not lose their jobs because of the actions of a radical few. Lawbreakers should not be empowered to hold Alberta's economy hostage. This government is taking steps to uphold the rule of law, democratic processes, and good-faith negotiations by introducing the essential infrastructure protection act. In recent days it has become clear that the consequences of breaking the law through blockades and other targeting of infrastructure must have a specific penalty. This government has introduced legislation to do just that. The Critical Infrastructure Defence Act will protect essential infrastructure from damage or interference caused by blockades, protests, or similar activities. This bill adds to legislation previously passed by the government to prevent trespassing and protect rural properties from damage and harassment.

Once again, Mr. Speaker, the events of earlier this year show how critical it is for illegal actions to have consequences. This bill does just that. Bill 1 creates a criminal offence for anyone wilfully entering an area containing essential infrastructure, wilfully damaging essential infrastructure, or wilfully interfering with the construction, maintenance, or operation of critical infrastructure. Bill 1 also makes aiding or counselling those who obstruct critical infrastructure an offence in and of itself, and the trespassing on or obstruction of a piece of critical infrastructure has serious consequences. An individual who has committed this offence faces a fine between \$1,000 and \$10,000 for the first offence. Repeat offenders face increased fines of up to \$25,000. This bill also lays out the precedent of a term of imprisonment of up to six months.

The infrastructure that is protected by this law includes those on public or private property. This continues our government's commitment to the property rights of Albertans. What constitutes essential infrastructure is extensive, ensuring that it covers the potential threat to many industries. Under the new law it would be a criminal offence to damage or interfere in the operation of pipelines, mines, highways, railways, and oil and gas refinery sites, to name only a few. The message underlying this legislation is simple but essential: trying to hold the economy hostage by targeting infrastructure is unacceptable here in Alberta.

Mr. Speaker, the measures contained in the Critical Infrastructure Defence Act are necessary. Events of earlier this year showed that it is far too easy for radical, illegal actions to undermine constructive consultations and dialogue. The measures contained in this bill send a clear message that there will be consequences when infrastructure on public or private land is being illegally blocked or targeted. This legislation is being introduced at a critical moment. The COVID-19 pandemic and accompanying economic crisis have showed just how important it is to support job creation for Albertans.

Alberta's economy and the hard-working people of this province simply can't afford to be held hostage by radicals or, in the words of our Premier, zealots of the green left who are blocking the means of prosperity. Now more than ever is the time to stand up against radicalism and in favour of Albertans' jobs and industries. It is clear that not making decisive actions on protesters has consequences for the economy. Bill 1 yet again shows how this government is standing up for the interests of Albertans in ensuring that the radical few will not interrupt our economy.

Thank you.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you to the hon. Member for Vermilion-Lloydminster-Wainwright for those comments.

Standing Order 29(2)(a) is available should anybody be willing to speak under that. I see the hon. Member for Grande Prairie has risen.

Mrs. Allard: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure to be here this morning. I was interested to hear from the hon. member and would like to hear more about what he has to say about how it's affected his constituency and what he thinks this bill will do for the protection of jobs and prosperity for all Albertans.

9:20

The Acting Speaker: I see the hon. Member for Vermilion-Lloydminster-Wainwright has risen to respond.

Mr. Rowswell: Thank you very much. Thank you for the question. When it was happening, there were a couple of issues. One, of course, I come from a large grain area. When the rail stops, the price of grain goes down. People had contracts that they had to fulfill; they couldn't do it. That was on the grain side. It impacted all the agricultural products, even beef, hogs, everything. We're a net exporter of stuff, and when you block the railways, you know, you kill our economy. We just don't need that kind of problem happening.

The other one that concerned me a lot was the perception of the law not being respected and the potential for people to take the law into their own hands. We saw a little bit of that on the west side of the city here where citizens, because of frustration that the law wasn't being upheld, went and did it themselves. Now, happily, the protesters didn't put up a fight. It all appeared to be respectful. They let them do it, and they went away, and it was short lived. But I think that that's a big potential problem that we've got to be aware of. You have to uphold the rule of law, and if it's seen that you don't, you have anarchy and then you've got good people fighting the protesters, and it could just blow up.

You know, I heard people in my own constituency that said: "Why can't we take them off that railway? Like, why aren't they doing their job, right?" People were talking about going out: "Let's go do it ourselves. We'll go there and we'll get 'er done." Of course, they're phoning me up to complain about it and asking, like: would you support that? Well, I don't want to have a fight; I don't want to have a battle. But I think that was a big fear for me, not only the economy that we were hurting but the potential conflict that could have come about when the law is not upheld.

Yeah, I think my major concern is the economy and then that we're putting people at each other's throats and that we're setting up a system, you know, where there could have been some real serious things happening and then damage to, like, the trains. There were fires set, and they were throwing rocks and stuff. And who knows? That could have hit an engineer. It could have hit some of the operating equipment within that. Like, you just can't have that.

With this bill Alberta is doing the best it can to uphold the rule of law. I'm sure we'll continue to talk to our federal counterparts, ask them to do their part. I'm looking forward to that. I hope we pass this bill.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, hon. Member for Vermilion-Lloydminster-Wainwright.

With about 50 seconds left under 29(2)(a) and seeing no one, are there any other hon. members wishing to join debate? I see the hon. Member for Lac Ste. Anne-Parkland has risen to speak.

Mr. Getson: Perfect. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's good to be back. I'm not sure how everyone else was managing with the COVID crisis and everything taking place, but we're back full day, full on. Everyone here back to work: it's fantastic. It almost feels like the old groundhog is popping out of the hole for the first time. It's great to see everyone's smiling faces.

Bill 1, Critical Infrastructure Defence Act: this one is something that we started to talk about in the House before everything really took place with COVID and before we had to lock down a bit. A bunch of us had made speeches on it. The folks out at Acheson: hats off to you for taking, you know, good actions in your hands. That's out in our area as well. The Member for Spruce Grove-Stony Plain had mentioned that and my colleague across the aisle from the eastern part of the province, where they're sitting on the border with Saskatchewan.

Here is the Wayback Machine. We've been dealing with COVID, but if we can all recall, with the Wayback Machine, let's go back to that period. We had, literally, in Canada, for the first time in one of our histories, anarchy. We have laws to protect against these acts. We have laws in place to make sure that our products keep getting to market. We have, you know, great ways of doing debate and protests and all those things. What happened was that you had a bunch of extremist groups – and let's put it in context – groups that wanted to push the bounds of the law to see how far it would go. What helped predicate some of this? Well, actually, lack of leadership from our Prime Minister. He was silent on the issue. He thought it should take more time, that we should allow this to take place, its natural course. From what I recall – and, you know, someone can correct me if I'm wrong – British Columbia was having issues with their roads and highways, Quebec was having tons of issues down in that end, we had Ontario shut down, and it was only a matter of time. Like, it was starting to back up all of our shipments and our goods.

We talked about Teck, some of the uncertainty that's taking place there. They're, you know, wanting to invest in our area up here in the oil sands, and they're getting uncertainty on the environmental file. They're predominantly a mining company. They've got tons and tons of railcars all piled up across the country on sidings, and they can't get to market. All of a sudden they're seeing this, and it's making no sense. No one is doing anything. You've got a population that's frustrated. You've got a police force that wants to do the right thing, but honestly they're kind of scared to act because they're not sure which side the law is on anymore. It wasn't until Alberta – it happened here in Alberta that, finally, people themselves said: this is enough. And they did it in a good way. These were strangers. It wasn't like you had a bunch of people all talking on the Internet and having a flash mob or whatever the heck the millennial folks do or whatever they call it. I'm not sure. It wasn't like they had this thing on social media. They actually kind of coalesced, got together and said: look, this is wrong.

What you saw from the newscast was people driving across there going: "Why are you doing this? We've been hit in the recession for a number of years. People have been put out of work." Everything was kind of on the decline at the time, and all of a sudden you've got – I don't know – spoiled kids pushing the bounds of what the parents' law was. Let's put it in context. These were not lawful protests. They were blocking infrastructure. There were health and safety risks. They were hitting the economy. They were doing it all the wrong way. So some folks got together, went out there, and peacefully took down those barricades, took down those blockades.

The police officers at the time did the right thing. They allowed that to happen. In some other jurisdictions they stopped the counterprotests, if you will, but at least in Alberta – I'm proud of this province, strong and free – they did the right thing. The peace officers upheld it, and it was a quick, clear message. Our Premier and our minister came out right away. Within 12 hours we said: "This isn't allowed. Get those things down." Because of that one little moment, it's like throwing that pebble in the pond. Because of that one little ripple effect, we saw what happened. The next thing

you know, Quebec is putting things in place. Next, you know, the Prime Minister is actually getting off the bench and doing something. The next thing you know, you've got the guys in Ontario opening it up, and the B.C. blockades came down.

What it really demonstrated there was that, yeah, as Canadians we're good. We follow the law, respect the law. We have them in place. Allow the guys and the ladies out there that are carrying the badges to enforce the law, and allow them to know that it makes sense and that they're not going to be hung out in the wind. You know, as politicians we change our flavour every second day, it seems, sometimes, but let's not put them at risk. I can see one of the former service members here nodding a bit. I know he's not supposed to, so maybe I just caught it out of the corner of my eye by accident. But that's kind of the deal that was taking place, so you put the law enforcement community kind of at odds.

Now, with this act identifying what our critical infrastructure is, let's put it in the context of COVID. We have supply lines that are very critical. When you look at the essential services, they are identified across the country which ones we need to keep rolling and what is needed to keep going. We look at our trade. North and south routes are actually pretty quick, but going across Canada – we're a massive country. We have this beautiful country – you've got all the great wonders of the world here and all this wonderful nature – but the problem is that we don't have a lot of roads or rail built, so you kind of have these key corridors.

If you knock down these key corridors – they're linear by nature. When you look at how CP Rail and CN Rail run, they don't have dual tracks between both of them anymore. They used to have dual tracks on their systems. They have single tracks with sidings. When you literally are running your trains and you're picking up your cartage and you're running across the prairies or wherever you're getting to, you have these things called meets. Where these trains actually meet, you've got to sidetrack one, put it on a siding so the other one can go through.

When you start plotting all the cartage across the country, literally you're planning your routes, you're planning your trade movements a month, two months in advance because you're literally looking at the cartage that's coming out of Asia. You're grabbing it at Tsawwassen terminal. You're off-loading it from the ship, putting it onto a train, and you're heading it down east. At the other end you're moving cartage the other way, so you literally have to plot out where your ships and your movements are going. It's a logistical, wonderful ballet dance. If you ever want to get into this and start planning logistics, it's fantastic. What we've done now with our models for most of the economy is just-in-time delivery. You base it on – we've gotten really good at getting product across the oceans, getting them to different areas, and getting them to store shelves.

My colleague had noted that we're an exporter: thermal coal. You can't make steel without thermal coal. Well – guess what? – we push a bunch of that over to the Asian markets, down to the U.S., otherwise where they need our coal. You back up steel production.

9:30

Our grain: well, you can't get your grain to market. You can't feed those hungry mouths around the world. Starving children: not a good thing. We can't get our product to market because – what? – some spoiled protester is going to stop how the rest of the world operates. So now you've got everything backed up. The farmers can't get their product there. You're paying demurrage on your ships sitting out in port because you can't get them to market. These are the impacts.

Let's put it in context, again, back to COVID. We kept the truckers open. We kept those borders going north and south

because, literally, we've got a period of about one week that we can absorb before those shelves get empty. This is how critical our infrastructure is. When we're talking road, rail, pipe, mines, telecommunications, et cetera, yeah, we were literally taken hostage in our own province by our own people, our own population and a bunch of disruptors, disruptors who like to just, you know, cause havoc, raise a mess, raise a fuss, do these things. They don't realize – unless they do realize. That's even worse. That's even more nefarious because then they're holding us hostage for our economy, for people's livelihoods, for their actual health and well-being, and not just us but the global economy. Things that most people would consider every day that they're just there. These are the essential items that we're talking about, so critical infrastructure.

I'll just rattle off a few of those here. We've got pipelines and related infrastructure, so both the existing pipelines and the ones under construction. I'll regale you a little bit. We've got this little project. I'm not sure if anyone's heard of it. It's called TMX. I know it's never made much of in the news stories or anything else. You know, it's really smooth sailing on that pipeline project. It only took 10 years and, you know, four different owners to get into it, and then government backing, all of our taxpayer dollars, so it was kind of a critical infrastructure, I would say, to get to that point.

Well, out on the line there what the guys were telling me – again, I have colleagues that are out on that project – is that there were protesters trying to get into the pipe yards and drill holes in the pipe and then epoxy it afterwards. So then when you take this stick of pipe, you've done all your quality control, you've welded it up, and then you hydro test the darn thing, you're popping holes out like a garden sprinkler hose or the kids on the little banana slide going down the lawn. Not a good deal. You can't see where it's at, so then you have to actually shut the line in, you drop the hydro test pressures, you actually have to go back and try to trace it and dig up the line and everything else. Of course, you know, environment is a very big concern for us, so after we've done all the really good things for the installation, then you've got to go back and start digging gopher holes all over the place to find the holes that someone's drilled in.

Now, heaven forbid that that would have held. I mean, we have lots of safety that was in place, but let's say, for example, they only just damaged it slightly, you know, like a pinhole. Well, then over time that's where your corrosion is going to take place. That's where you're going to have your oil leak, and if it was a gas line – oh, my God – bang. These are the acts that people go through to say that they are protesting. That is outright sabotage. That's putting people at risk. That's putting health at risk. It's putting our economy at risk.

This Critical Infrastructure Defence Act: it's a shame that we have to do it, but apparently we've reached that point in our society where unless you put a \$10,000 fine or a \$1,000 fine for the first one, \$10,000, \$25,000 for subsequent offences, a term of imprisonment up to six months, a fine and imprisonment, penalties for corporations – here's the interesting part. You've got corporations that are actually condoning and backing this behaviour, getting the youth all riled up so they can do a TikTok video while they're out on a protest line. Those are the real ones that should be gone after here, the ones that are stirring up the doers and the disruptors, right? They're getting a bunch of other people to do their little dirty work and sit back there and – what? – get some financial gain or some personal gain out of it. I'm not sure what the motivators would be to put the economy and people's health and safety at risk, not sure about that at all.

Those are some of the things that took place, that are going in right away. I'm really happy to talk about this. When we start talking about telecommunications – I'm not sure if folks are aware.

Again, coming back to the railroad concept, I had the opportunity earlier on in my career as a project manager to do a fibre-optic installation. I was part of a team that actually went right across Canada. It was part of the SuperNet when we did that. I had a segment that was out in Vancouver. We actually did all the build in Vancouver. We had a segment here in Edmonton that went from the CN Rail tracks, actually, down to the CN building and then up and out to the main line. What we were doing there when we got this contract – on the telecommunication side there was a bit of a tech bubble. I'm not sure if people remember that, with the Wayback Machine again. But, literally, we were building out a fibre-optic network across Canada. The best corridor, the best conduit for that was the rail line.

So we made a deal as a private contractor with CP Rail, and we had Telus involved at the same time. That was one of our partners. What we installed was a bunch of fibre-optic cables. Now, the cool thing with this was that it took all the signals and communications that CP typically ran on radio communications or phone communications at that time and put them all on fibre optics. Now, I'm not sure if folks are aware. The little kids at home when they put on their model train engineer hat and they go downstairs and they run their train and they've got the little switches – if they've got the really expensive set, they can push a little button and do the switch – that's how basically the whole model works.

There's a network management centre sitting down in Calgary at CP tower, and it literally ties in Burlington Northern and it ties in all of CP Rail's assets. Again, coming back to the logistics, when they're switching those tracks, when they're doing those sidings and movements, that's all done from a computer screen. My colleague will understand this one; he actually came from that world as well. They actually hit the switch there. Now, if I'm out on the line, I can have radio communications back to a person at CP Rail, and I can call those trains about a mile out, and I'm doing those. So, again, when we're doing that, we're installing this critical infrastructure that's literally accounting for the train movements.

Now, along old Gitche Gumee there, the great Lake Superior, I was out on a scouting mission, and we were looking to install some of those fibre optics, obviously looking at different routes and locations. When you talk about infrastructure, again, we think, you know, of the highways and we look at the train crossings here at level crossings, but you have to understand that we're going through some of the most rugged terrain in the country. There was literally a section where we were looking at putting in about six clicks of fibre-optic cable, and we had five trucks out there, high-rail trucks. We're coming across this sweeping corner. It's about two miles. It's a blind corner, and I felt this deflection in the track, and the CP Rail-assigned protecting foreman, because they are the guys that actually run the trains; we were the contractors working along it, doing this install. I turned to Randy, and I said: "Is that normal? Like, do you normally have those bounces?" And he's going, "That doesn't make sense." Now, this is on a big engineered fill. Like, this was probably about a kilometre and a half of sweeping curve. You've got about a 200-foot drop off to Lake Superior on one side, and then you've got about another 150 feet on the other side. It's this huge mass of rock fill, and there's this French drain and everything else.

So I got Randy to stop. We had trucks on either side; one on the west side of the deflection, one on the east side of the deflection. We walked back, and I could hear like the old Bob Barker game Plinko: klink, klink, klink, klink, klink. We're looking, and below the tracks all of sudden you start seeing this deflection taking place. What's happening is that this French drain that was taking place, it's falling out. It's literally having a sinkhole underneath this track. So by the time that we made the call back to CP, to the headquarters,

and got our other trucks across the tracks, that railbed had already dropped out about four feet below the bottom of those tracks. Literally, it was dangling there. Now, if you're sitting in a train and you're ripping along, you're not going to see that deflection until it's too late.

Literally, those folks have enough to deal with. They have lots of maintenance to take care of. They have lots of natural disasters that can potentially take place without having to worry about a bunch of other people shutting down the industry or causing damage to those trains or those tracks or those infrastructures. Because, again, if anyone's ever seen a pileup on a train, you don't just hit the brakes and stop on a dime. It piles up. It's bad. It's bad for everybody.

Again, fibre optics are along those tracks. You have a lot of gas installations along those tracks. We're talking about energy utility corridors. This is fantastic. It's a great way of reducing the impact that we have. You have your consultation process with all the stakeholders and engagement along the way. You make sure that your environmental impacts are lessened. So if we're going back to caribou, as an example, you're only making minor disturbances in prescribed locations. Now, the risk on that if we start dropping in our utilities and we start putting everything along these corridors, those are the ones that we can be held at ransom with the most. If you put an illegal blockade on there, all of a sudden you're shutting down railroads, et cetera.

So this act, what's going in place, I sure hope it passes because we need it.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you.

Hon. members, 29(2)(a) is available, and I see the hon. Member for Peace River has risen.

Mr. Williams: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you again to my hon. friend across the aisle from Lac Ste. Anne-Parkland for his enthralling speech. I know that I saw as many members of the opposition smiling as I did members of the government benches, though, sadly, in hopes of catching him out on something rather than listening to the wonderful oration.

But it made me think while I was listening, Mr. Speaker: why is it that the members of the opposition are not as enthusiastic as we are on this bill? It strikes me that this is the red meat for them. I mean, these are union workers that cannot get to their jobs. These are average working men and women that suffer. It seems to me the kind of thing that the NDP of yesteryear would have jumped on and said: "Yes, this is bipartisan. Yes, this is something we support because we care about the average Albertan; we care about the rule of law; we care about our province and our nation."

9:40

Instead, we see much more of a hum-haw approach, which is too bad, because I believe the speech from the member opposite really highlighted some real concerns about rule of law in our society and the direction we're going. I wondered: what is it about his belief that makes him so animated? I think it's best summarized like this, and it helps to draw the line between the progressives and the conservatives on this issue in a way that makes sense. Conservatives believe that good things are more easily destroyed than they are created.

That's the difference, Mr. Speaker, and fundamentally the uniting function of the entire progressive coalition is: let's destroy the beautiful, good, and true things that have been handed down to us by our forefathers. That's why it was so beautiful to see the member referencing railroads and trains so often. This nation was built together - it is now being pulled apart, sadly, by the current Prime Minister and his identity politics - pulled together by a railroad.

It is very fitting that this bill came to a climax on the question of protesting railroads. Now, what the member, my good colleague from Lac Ste. Anne-Parkland, was talking about was how railroads unite economically. It was as true then as it is today. Those rights-of-way are fundamentally important. They're fundamentally important not just in the abstract, in the rule of law. That's true, but it's important for the average union member, NDP, dues-paying voter. That's who it's also important for, blue-collar Edmonton, Mr. Speaker. That's who it matters to.

We see a culture shift happening. We see increasingly a culture shift move away from that aspect of the coalition and instead focus on a radicalized ideological view that says that progress economically is bad, that says that the ability for individuals to thrive is bad. That is a tragedy, Mr. Speaker, and I just wonder - and I don't want to hog all the time, though it's good to be up again - if the Member for Lac Ste. Anne-Parkland could let the House know a bit about these, you know, spoiled protesters, spoiled kids, the TikTok culture that seems to have taken over - right? - and talk a bit about the TikTok culture and how that aspect of it has really changed the way that we see ourselves as a country, sadly.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

I see the hon. Member for Lac Ste. Anne-Parkland has risen with about a minute and a half remaining.

Mr. Getson: Well, I appreciate the question. I appreciate the colour on it as well. As an observation, as a father of four, there's kind of a generational shift here. I think that's pretty much what we're seeing right now. There has been - I don't know if it's through the education system or socialwise or anyways, but there has been this hype. There has been this big buster to go out and protest. It doesn't matter if you actually did the research on it. It doesn't matter if you understand the impacts, but it's your, you know, God-given right: go protest something.

Some of the folks - I don't know. I'm not very good at protesting. I was always too busy working, but some of the members opposite have actually helped document and draft how to protest. When you start encapsulating and envisioning the minds, and you start pulling together some of the youth, they want a cause. They want something to fight for, and that's genuine and honest. The dishonesty that comes in that is when you pollute that pureness, that pureness of wanting to stand up and do the right thing, when you pollute that pureness to someone's own nefarious ends. I referenced the corporations and the other disruptors behind the scenes. Those are the ones pulling the strings on our youth. Those are the ones that are misguiding them. Those are the ones that have these nefarious, short-sighted intents to cause disruption to get their own little means, and typically it's not socially driven; it's economically driven. There's a saying out in the patch: follow the dollars; you'll find out the cause. This is no different.

So to the member from up north in God's country and Peace Country: that's the issue. The kids are being disrupted, and they're being motivated incorrectly.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

Are there any other members wishing to speak? I see the hon. Member for Central Peace-Notley has risen.

Mr. Loewen: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. A pleasure to be here today to be able to, I guess, come back into the Legislature and get back to work here. It's also a pleasure to talk about Bill 1, Critical Infrastructure Defence Act. I think, first of all: what would this legislation do? If passed, Bill 1 would protect essential infrastructure from damage or interference caused by blockades,

protests, or similar activities. I think what we've seen here is that Albertans have become increasingly frustrated by some of these protests that have been happening, these illegal protests that have been taking away the freedom of Albertans.

Now, of course, Albertans do have freedom of expression. They can assemble. They can protest. They can do all these things to express their concerns with what's happening within society, and that's perfectly fine. That's a right that people have. But these rights cannot override the rights of the people of Alberta to go about and do their business in a legal, ethical way.

These protests also cannot break laws, but unfortunately, Mr. Speaker, we've seen this over and over again. These protests have been breaking laws. These protesters have been breaking laws, and they're not being held accountable for those illegal actions. Of course, this bill here: we've brought this forward to make sure that these people that are committing these illegal acts, these acts that are detrimental to our economy, detrimental to the safety of themselves and other people, and detrimental to, in fact, all Canadians, will be held accountable for their actions. I think one of the most important things that we need to realize is that if we don't have accountability, if we don't have the rule of law and have that ability to enforce the rule of law, we really have no way to protect the rights of Albertans and Canadians.

Now, this legislation adds to existing legislation and is consistent with amendments made in the fall of 2019 to the Trespass to Premises Act and the Petty Trespass Act. This legislation is going to apply to both privately owned and publicly owned essential infrastructure. Of course, we have the definition of essential infrastructure, which is outlined in the bill, too. It covers pipelines; oil and gas production; refinery sites; mines; utilities – electric, gas, or even water – telecommunication lines, towers, and equipment; highways; railways; dams. All those types of essential infrastructure this bill will protect.

It'll create an offence for those who “without lawful right, justification or excuse wilfully enter on any essential infrastructure,” including entering with permission “obtained by false pretenses.” It also takes into account those that “wilfully damage or destroy... essential infrastructure” and those who “wilfully obstruct, interrupt or interfere with the construction, maintenance... or operation of any essential infrastructure [rendering] the essential infrastructure dangerous, useless, inoperative or ineffective.” It covers a wide range of illegal activities that these protesters sometimes do in their attempts to – I don't know – make some political point or to actually cause damage or pain to others.

It also creates an offence for an individual or corporation that aids or counsels the direct commission of an offence. I think that's important, too. A lot of times we have these organizations, that could be anywhere in the world, that are directing people on the ground to do these illegal acts, and those groups need to be held accountable, too. We can't just sit back and allow those groups to do these things and for them to think that they're above the law, that they don't have to be accountable for the actions of the people they direct. I think that's another important part of this legislation.

Of course, there will be minimum fines for individuals, \$1,000 and up to \$10,000 for a first offence and \$25,000 for subsequent offences, and terms of imprisonment up to six months or both a fine and imprisonment, and then for corporations a fine of \$10,000 up to \$200,000.

Mr. Speaker, I mean, we do need to take these things seriously because they are serious. These people that think they can block our economy, create unsafe situations for themselves and others need to be held accountable. They need to understand that these are serious things, and with serious acts come serious consequences.

Now, our government will do all we can to discourage these illegal protests that are scaring away investors. When we look at what's happened over the last several years in particular, we've seen the Teck Frontier mine withdraw their proposal to work in the oil sands in the Fort McMurray area, and we've seen that that company was being influenced by these protesters. Because of that, we lost billions of dollars of investment for Alberta and we lost thousands of jobs.

9:50

Of course, what's happened is that when we drive that investment away from Alberta and away from Canada, that leaves opportunities for other countries that don't have the social standards, the safety, and the environmental standards that we have here in Alberta to produce our oil and gas. It causes that market to be filled by some of these other countries. I think it's unfortunate that Albertans and Canadians lose opportunities when this happens and that these other countries that are far less socially responsible pick up the slack and are able to produce their products without the same amount of interference that we have to go through. Now, this law recognizes the economic freedom of Alberta's businesses, our essential infrastructure, and our workers. Again, we need to have the tougher penalties to deter these illegal activities.

I just wanted to mention another thing, too. The right to protest does not include being able to prevent your neighbours from getting to work and putting food on the table or threatening their security. Albertans expect their government to deal with lawlessness and stand up for the values that all law-abiding citizens share, and this government is doing just that. That's a quote from our Premier. Again, we need to realize the seriousness of these acts that these people are doing.

Now, when these railway blockades happened just recently here, we've got to realize that it didn't just stop the oil and gas from moving, it didn't just affect those industries, but it affected our agriculture industry and the export markets that we rely on for our ag products for our farmers and ranchers here in Alberta. It affected the movement of coal, metallurgical coal in particular, that needs to be used world-wide to develop our steel. A lot of times these protesters probably realize this. I'm sure they don't care about anybody else but whatever little agenda they have. But it's widespread, the effects of this on the economy: again, the ag industry and any products that move by rail, the auto manufacturers that move cars by rail, you know, any number of things that move by rail that were interfered with by these protests.

We can't allow radicals like this to rule. We have the rule of law in this country, and that rule of law needs to be upheld. We can't have these radicals just feeling like they're above the law. We've lost billions of dollars of economic benefit because we haven't been able to build pipelines. We have corporations that want to build pipelines, that have money, are willing to invest to build pipelines to get our products to market, but we have protesters that are standing in the way. In fact, we have governments within Canada standing in the way of these investors taking their own money and wanting to improve things for Alberta and for Canada by bringing investment here into our country.

We're sitting here in a situation now after this pandemic and with an economy that's had serious, serious consequences because of the COVID pandemic. We've also had serious problems because of the price of oil, and here we are. Had we had pipelines built when the companies wanted to build them, if they hadn't been obstructed by protesters and by governments that haven't been willing to stand up for the rule of law, we wouldn't be in such a dire situation here. We wouldn't be so far in debt and paying billions of dollars of interest per year if we'd just been able to follow the rule of law and had

governments willing to support these companies in their endeavours – not even support them. I mean, they didn't need support. All they needed was the interference removed. All that needs to happen is that we need to remove this interference so that these companies can do their work that they're lawfully allowed to do, that's beneficial to all of our people here, not just Albertans but all Canadians.

[The Speaker in the chair]

But we see this over and over again, where radical protesters and interfering governments are allowed to continue to basically destroy our economy. There have to be consequences to breaking the law. We need to make sure that these illegal protesters don't jeopardize the safety and the well-being of our people here that we represent.

If we look back in history, railways united Canada. The railway united Canada, brought Canada together right in the beginning of Canadian history. Today we have pipelines that could do the same because pipelines are a benefit to all Canadians both financially and beneficial to social programs because those products and that income creates revenue for governments to provide the social programs that we need. We sit in a situation right now, of course, with the billions of dollars of debt, billions of dollars of interest being paid out every year, money that isn't being spent on social programs. It's actually being spent on interest to foreign investors and bankers.

Now, I just want to bring – just last fall, I believe it was October 7, there was a group called Extinction Rebellion, and they blockaded a bridge here in Edmonton, not too far from the Legislature where we sit right now. That group blockaded that bridge. I can't remember for how long. It was probably an hour or maybe two hours. They were allowed to blockade that bridge. Of course, a lot of people think: well, so some people were inconvenienced while they were travelling to work. But, Mr. Speaker, that's not the only problem. Can you imagine with that backed-up traffic through that course of time if there had been an ambulance trying to get somebody to the hospital in an emergency and they got caught in that traffic jam because of that blockade? That is serious, serious business.

When we look at these groups like that, Extinction Rebellion – and I do want to point out that there's a member from the NDP caucus, the Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood, that suggested that Extinction Rebellion should be teaching in our classrooms, and that's absolutely ludicrous to think that a group that would do an illegal blockade, jeopardize the lives of people here in Alberta, is supported by members of the NDP. In fact, some of them were seen at a rally that Extinction Rebellion put on. Mr. Speaker, when we look at groups like that, Extinction Rebellion, that would do something so horrible and so dangerous to members of our community, the people that we represent here in Alberta, and to think that the NDP has supported groups that radical – we know that they've protested pipelines, we know that they're against our oil and gas industry.

We have an opportunity here, Mr. Speaker, to send a strong message to groups like Extinction Rebellion and any of these other groups that want to take our economy, to destroy our economy, to jeopardize the safety of our people. We have a strong opportunity to send a message to them here with this Bill 1. I would hope that every single person in this Legislature will support Bill 1 and help pass Bill 1 so that we can have that opportunity to send that strong message.

Mr. Speaker, Bill 1, Critical Infrastructure Defence Act, is an act that will give us an opportunity to show Albertans that we support

them, to show Canadians that we support them, that we'll have the opportunity to let them know that as a government here in this Legislature we want to protect their rights, their rights to be able to make a living, to do the things that they would like to do, and to have the safety and security that they need.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Hon. members, Standing Order 29(2)(a) is available if anyone has a brief question or comment for the hon. member.

Seeing none, we are at second reading of Bill 1. Is there anyone else wishing to join in the debate for second reading of Bill 1? I see no one.

I am prepared to call the question. However, the hon. the Premier is able to close debate should he wish to do so.

[Motion carried; Bill 1 read a second time]

10:00

Government Motions

Legislative Assembly Debate on COVID-19

19. Mr. Jason Nixon moved:

Be it resolved that despite any standing order and immediately on the passage of this motion the Assembly is to debate the urgent public matter of the COVID-19 pandemic for the purposes of receiving and considering further developments since the Assembly's April 1, 2020, debate relating to the pandemic in the following manner:

- (a) the Premier may make the first statement not exceeding 30 minutes;
- (b) immediately following the Premier's statement, the Leader of the Official Opposition may make a statement not exceeding 15 minutes;
- (c) immediately following the Leader of the Official Opposition's statement and for a period not exceeding 30 minutes
 - (i) the Leader of the Official Opposition may ask questions on matters relevant to the Premier's statement, and
 - (ii) the Premier may respond to those questions;
- (d) any other member of the Executive Council may make a statement not exceeding 10 minutes;
- (e) immediately following each statement made by a member of the Executive Council and for a period not exceeding 15 minutes
 - (i) members who are not a member of the Executive Council may ask questions on matters relevant to the statement, and
 - (ii) the member of the Executive Council who made the statement may respond to those questions;
- (f) a member who asks a question or a member of the Executive Council who responds in accordance with clause (c) or (e) is limited to a period of two minutes at one time to ask that question or make a response;
- (g) immediately after all statements and related periods for questions and responses have concluded, the debate is considered to have been concluded by the Assembly without decision.

Mr. Jason Nixon: Mr. Speaker, I think the motion is obvious. With that said, I anticipate – I don't know for sure – that my friend the hon. Opposition House Leader will be moving a slight amendment to the motion, and I anticipate, if it's the amendment that I am anticipating, that it will enjoy the support certainly of the Government House Leader. I would encourage my colleagues to support that, and then we'll move on with the day's debate.

The Speaker: Hon. members, Government Motion 19 is a debatable motion according to Standing Order 18(1)(f). Is there anyone wishing to join in the debate?

Speaker's Ruling Amendments

The Speaker: Prior to doing so, I see the hon. Opposition House Leader. It looks like she is intending to join the debate, and if the hon. Government House Leader is correct, perhaps she even has an amendment. With respect to how amendments will be handled for the remainder of the session, I was going to provide some comments prior to the daily Routine, but given it seems likely that an amendment will be moved, we will be changing the process regarding amendments that are moved here in the Assembly to minimize the number of individuals who need to be moving around the Assembly.

Regarding amendments moved in Committee of the Whole, at second and third readings, and in any other instance, an LASS member will continue to retrieve the original and copies from the member who is moving the amendment and deliver the amendment to the Speaker and to the table as required. They will also distribute an amendment to the Government House Leader or the Opposition House Leader, as it may be.

A modified process to distribute copies of the amendment will now be followed. The details of the process will be that any members wishing to receive a copy of the amendment should do so by a show of hands, and the LASS will distribute that to you. Additional copies will be placed on the tabling tables, which can be found at either side of the Chamber, and members are welcome to retrieve one by themselves.

Debate Continued

The Speaker: The hon. the Official Opposition House Leader has the call.

Ms Sweet: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As the Government House Leader and you have already indicated, I do have an amendment to the motion, so I have put it on the desk beside me with the originals and copies to be picked up.

Would you like me to read it into the record, Mr. Speaker? Yes. Okay.

The Member for Edmonton-Manning to move that Government Motion 19 be amended as follows: (a) in clause (d) by striking out "any other member of the Executive Council may" and substituting "the Minister of Health, the President of Treasury Board and Minister of Finance, the Minister of Labour and Immigration, and the Minister of Education may each then"; (b) in clause (e), one, by adding "under clause (d)" immediately after "member of the Executive Council" and, two, striking out "15 minutes" and substituting "50 minutes"; (c) by adding the following immediately after clause (e):

(e.1) immediately after the statements and related periods for questions referred to in clauses (d) and (e) have concluded, any other member of the Executive Council may make a statement not exceeding 10 minutes;

(e.2) immediately following each statement made by a member of the Executive Council under clause (e.1) and for a period not exceeding 15 minutes,

(i) members who are not a member of the Executive Council may ask questions on matters relevant to the statement, and

(ii) the member of the Executive Council who made the statement may respond to those questions.

And (d) in clause (f) by striking out "clause (c) or (e)" and substituting "clause (c), (e), or (e.2)"; (e) by adding the following after clause (g):

(h) government officials may be seated in the Assembly during the debate to assist members of the Executive Council;

(i) if the debate is not concluded at the ordinary hour of adjournment during a morning or afternoon sitting, the debate shall resume as the first item of business under Orders of the Day at the Assembly's next sitting.

Mr. Speaker, I'll be very quick with regard to the amendment. I appreciate that the government has put forward the motion to allow the opposition and private members of the House to ask questions of the ministers in regard to COVID. As we all know, it's an extremely important issue that's impacting all Albertans. We identified four ministries that have definitely been taking a lead in regard to addressing the pandemic, so we wanted to give an opportunity for those ministers to be able to have a little bit more time to respond, of course, and recognize, just as we do in estimates and other structures, that sometimes having an official beside you to be able to help out is always a benefit.

I appreciate and I hope that the government will support this. We have discussed this, and of course the Government House Leader has indicated that the government is willing to amend the motion to allow that to happen. I would just like to move the amendment and thank the government for working in collaboration with us.

The Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

For clarity's sake, if there's anyone else that does require additional copies of the amendment, you can so indicate by raising your hand, and one will be delivered. Or they are now on the tabling tables for you, and you can collect one on your own.

It looks like the hon. Government House Leader has a comment to make.

Mr. Jason Nixon: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Very briefly, as I already indicated, we will likely support the amendment. Through you to my hon. government colleagues, this certainly is the amendment that was discussed, that I anticipated, and I would encourage them to support the amendment.

The Speaker: Hon. members, we will refer to the amendment as A1. It is a debatable amendment. Is there anyone else wishing to join in the debate?

Seeing none, I am prepared to call the question on amendment A1.

[Motion on amendment A1 carried]

The Speaker: I see the hon. Government House Leader rising.

Mr. Jason Nixon: Can we get the officials in?

The Speaker: As soon as we get to the debate.

Is there anyone else wishing to join in the debate on Government Motion 19 as moved and amended?

Seeing none, I'm prepared to call the question on Government Motion 19.

[Government Motion 19 carried]

The Speaker: We will allow approximately one minute for officials to join us here in the Chamber, and we will proceed with the COVID debate.

Hon. members, the hon. Premier has the call.

Legislative Assembly Debate on COVID-19

Mr. Kenney: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, and let me thank the Official Opposition and all members for having returned to do the work of the people, the business of Alberta, here in this Legislative Assembly. I believe we'll be the first Legislature in Canada and one of the first in North America to return to doing the people's business in a way that is fully compliant with public health orders during this peculiar time. I want to thank in particular the Official Opposition for their constructiveness in working with the Government House Leader in arranging for this session and particularly today's very important update and opportunity for questions on the response of Alberta to the COVID-19 pandemic, both the public health and the economic crisis that is a consequence of it.

10:10

Mr. Speaker, let me begin by expressing my condolences and, I know, that of all members to the families and friends of those who have passed away in Alberta as a result of this pandemic, some 139 Albertans that we know of whose lives have been taken by this virus as of yesterday afternoon.

I will offer a report on Alberta's response, which has been remarkably strong. For that I credit the people of Alberta and their ethic of personal responsibility and compassion for others. We as a province have managed to implement some of the least restrictive public health orders in the western world, certainly amongst the least restrictive in Canada, yet we have had far stronger results than other large population jurisdictions in combatting the spread of COVID-19.

As of yesterday, we have tested over the past 11 weeks some 6,900 COVID positive cases on 243,000 tests. That is to say that about 2.8 per cent of those who have been tested for COVID-19 have tested positive. To date 6,048 of those 6,900 cases have since recovered, so about 88 per cent of those who tested positive have happily recovered.

I should note that in more recent days, Mr. Speaker, as we see the number of new cases continue to come down and the number of recoveries continue to go up, we continue to maintain high levels of testing, and the percentage of those testing positive has come down as well, which is a very encouraging metric. I see that in recent days we've been averaging about 0.6 per cent of COVID tests in Alberta coming back positive. These are all important indicators that we have succeeded in flattening the curve and reducing the spread. Congratulations to Albertans for this important achievement.

There are currently about 669 active cases, with 45 Albertans in acute-care beds with COVID-19 and five in intensive care. That, of course, is a very important metric because what we all understand, even as laypeople, about the epidemiology of an influenza of this nature is that it is virtually impossible to completely eradicate the spread or its potential spread, but what is critical is that it not be permitted to overwhelm the health care system. I commend our administrators and health care personnel for having worked with alacrity to expand the total capacity of the health care system over the past months to a point where at its peak we had nearly 2,800 acute-care hospital beds set aside for COVID-19 patients. That has since come down to a thousand acute-care beds set aside for COVID-19 patients as we have begun through the relaunch to reallocate some of the dormant beds back to conventional acute care for non COVID-related maladies.

The first reported case in Alberta was on March 5. Of course, positive cases rose steadily until peaking at nearly 350 on April 23, which turns out to have been the peak in Alberta at least to date. It has been declining steadily ever since, and yesterday total new positive cases were only 22 on about 3,000 tests. These numbers,

as I say, highlight one of the most successful fights against the pandemic in the western world. We set out to flatten the curve, and Albertans did it. This is also a tribute to civil society groups and individuals who stepped up to help and protect the most vulnerable, to donate goods and services and, of course, to front-line health care workers and all who keep working to provide essential supplies and services.

Happily, Mr. Speaker, through much of the last 10 weeks, as I've said, on average we've been operating with about 2,300 COVID-19 designated acute-care beds, and I think we peaked at just over 100 of those that were occupied by COVID patients. Through most of this period we have seen well over 2,000 empty acute-care beds in our hospitals and 200 empty ICU beds that have been set aside for COVID-19 patients. That's what I call a good problem to have.

I think that currently we have three COVID-19 patients using ventilators. Of course, many of us were most concerned two months ago, looking at the situation in northern Italy, in New York, in Madrid, about the potential of running out of ventilator capacity. Again, credit to our officials both for having surged orders for ventilators as early as late 2019 and for having repurposed ventilators in the system here from chartered surgical facilities, from SAIT and NAIT, for example, so we were averaging about 250 extra-capacity ventilators over much of the past several weeks.

I would also like once again to pay tribute to Alberta Health Services, in particular Jitendra Prasad, the director of procurement for AHS, who did a brilliant job of beginning large-scale ordering of relevant PPE, personal protective equipment, on the first rumours of an influenzalike flu emanating from Hubei, China, in December of last year. Partly as a result of that and the long-term relationships with suppliers established by Alberta, we have done better than any Canadian province and better than, I think, virtually any jurisdiction in the world in terms of being prepared with medical equipment.

Currently I can report to the Assembly that we have 462,000 N95 masks available, which constitutes 78 days of inventory. We have 31.7 million procedural masks, constituting 117 days at the current burn rate; 33.6 million surgical gloves, representing a 44-day inventory at the current burn rate; 3.7 million face shields for 624 days of burn rate; 4.6 million gowns, representing 234 days of inventory; 327,000 goggles, representing 148 days of inventory.

I should add that for all of those categories of PPE we have enormous orders that are waiting to be filled, so in fact we expect that those inventories will only increase, which I believe validates our decision last month to have shared some of our surplus equipment with our fellow Canadians, particularly in British Columbia, Northwest Territories, Quebec, and Ontario as well as, I believe, Nova Scotia, because they were facing a much steeper curve, higher infections, hospitalizations and were less well equipped. I am happy to inform the Assembly that the government also has ordered 40 million nonsurgical masks for our program to make those available to members of the general public as we move into relaunch, and we have already received 20 million of those. Next week we will be announcing the distribution program.

As I've said, Mr. Speaker, one of the best measures of our preparedness and the efficacy of our pandemic response is the utilization rates of COVID beds and ICUs. As I've said, we now have, as of May 26, 1,000 dedicated beds in acute care – the current utilization rate is 4 per cent – and 200 dedicated ICU beds at current utilization of 2.5 per cent.

We continue to lead the world in testing, Mr. Speaker. Our current per capita testing rate is 536 tests per 10,000 people. That's over twice as high as our neighbours in British Columbia and 25 per cent higher than the next highest province, Quebec. Quite consistently amongst large-population jurisdictions we have led the world – we've certainly led North America – in terms of the

incidence of testing. We have since the very beginning, which is one of the reasons for Alberta containing the spread, because when the first cases arrived, we were able to do surge testing, in part because of preordering of reagent swabs and the preparedness of Alberta Precision Laboratories. As a result, that facilitated our aggressive tracing and tracking protocols very early on, so we were able to contain the initial cases in a way that many other jurisdictions could not.

10:20

In terms of hospitalization rates I'm pleased to report that through most of the past 10 weeks Alberta has had the lowest per capita rates of hospitalization and ICU admissions as well as mortalities amongst the large-population provinces. In Canada right now we're tied essentially with British Columbia in that respect, but we are far lower in terms of our rates of hospitalization, ICU admissions, and deaths than, for example, virtually every large-population jurisdiction across the western world. To put that in perspective, Alberta COVID-19 related fatalities per 100,000 are just over three compared to 10 in Germany; 30 in the United States; 39 in Sweden – and I pause to say to some members of the public who say that we should simply emulate Sweden that they must be prepared to defend a death rate 12 times higher per capita than what we've experienced in Alberta – 40 per 100,000 deaths in France; 55 in the United Kingdom, which for the first stage in this crisis followed effectively the Swedish model; 57 deaths per 100,000 in Spain; 54 in Italy; and 81 in Belgium.

Mr. Speaker, I just offer those troubling statistics to set some context for how well Albertans have done but also for how deadly this virus can be, because I know that some of our fellow Albertans are saying: "Well, you've just overreacted with your public health measures. Why did you bother doing this? We hardly have anybody in hospital." The truth is that we just need to look at other very advanced, sophisticated, developed countries with first-rate medical systems to see how hard they have been hit and the extent of the loss of life.

Mr. Speaker, we did this, as I've said, with far less stringent public health measures. You know, for example, Economic Development, Trade and Tourism estimates that 85 per cent of Alberta businesses were able to continue to operate, obviously, within our hygiene protocols over the past 10 weeks. The public health orders required the suspension of about 15 per cent of businesses, representing 12 per cent of the workforce and 4 per cent of our provincial GDP. Now, that is not for a moment to minimize the terrible impact on those business operators and their employees. Our heart goes out to them, and we thank them for the sacrifices that were made, and we understand and empathize with their profound frustration.

But I simply offer Albertans this context, Mr. Speaker. Other jurisdictions – you know, we did not have a lockdown in Alberta; we have not had. We are not locked down; we have not locked down. The only people that we required to stay at home voluntarily – some jurisdictions in Asia, if you get sick, literally lock you up in a total quarantine situation. Here we've asked people to stay home if they're sick, if they've tested positive, or if they've recently returned from travel. That's well less than 5 per cent of the population. Yes, we recommended that people work from home if they could and, obviously, follow the social distancing recommendations and so on. By way of comparison, the provinces of Quebec and Ontario, for example, completely suspended their manufacturing and construction sectors yet have had much higher levels of infection and fatalities than Alberta, which allowed those sectors to continue operating.

I simply say this. In this very challenging time, where every jurisdiction around the world has been trying on the best scientific advice to find the right balance to flatten the curve, to limit the spread, to save lives without unduly affecting the social and economic health of our societies – and I know that every one of those jurisdictions will look back when this is over and see that in some areas they went perhaps too far and in other areas perhaps they did not go far enough. Every jurisdiction in the whole world collectively will have many lessons to learn. But I believe fundamentally that here in Alberta what we have achieved to date is something to be proud of as Albertans in how they've conducted themselves.

Here's the point. The limited spread here, with lighter restrictions, is evidence fundamentally of one important thing, that Albertans did this voluntarily through their personal responsibility. They did not need in every aspect of their social and economic lives to be micromanaged by government. They did this by listening to the advice of our chief medical officer, by employing good old-fashioned Alberta common sense, by caring for the vulnerable. I think that is remarkable and commendable.

Within the western countries – Asian jurisdictions are a different category, really, because many of them immediately imposed border lockdowns from hot spots like Hubei in December and January. They avoided those, and they've taken much more aggressive, targeted measures, which I think in many ways we must emulate, and I'll get to that later. But in the western countries – and I should also say that the developing world: again, a very different situation because very low levels of testing are not indicative of what the real spread has been in many developing countries. In addition, many of them are in a summer season, where influenzas spread with less virulence. Amongst, let's say, the northern developed countries, I believe, Mr. Speaker, with the exception of Sweden, which has had strict public health orders in place, a limit of 50 people that could gather, shutting down bars, high schools, colleges, and so forth – with the exception of Sweden and perhaps some midwest U.S. states, we have had the least restrictive public health measures in place.

Mr. Speaker, Alberta is now amongst the first provinces to move into relaunch. Our strategy began at the beginning of May with the reopening of parks and golf courses, resumption of some scheduled surgeries and services provided by health professionals. The Minister of Health announced other measures in this respect last Friday. On May 14 retail businesses and hospitality businesses, farmers' markets, museums, art galleries, more surgeries and health services, places of worship, daycares, out of school care, day camps, more flexibility for postsecondary education began.

On May 25 stage 1 was implemented fully in Calgary and Brooks, which had become epicentres of the pandemic in Alberta. I regret for the citizens of Calgary and Brooks that things were delayed. I regret that that confirmation was given at the last minute, but that is when we received the advice from our public health officials – we were not going to ignore the advice, Mr. Speaker, that we received; 85 per cent of confirmed cases at that point were and continue to be in Calgary and Brooks – and our public health officials quite rightly wanted a few more days to monitor new cases and identify their sources. I'm pleased to see that their numbers have continued to move in the right direction.

As of May 15, Mr. Speaker, 77,000 Albertans are waiting for surgery, because obviously this has had an impact on non COVID-related health issues; 46,000 are waiting longer than clinically recommended. That is why it's important that we move forward with rescheduling surgeries, as we are doing.

Mr. Speaker, it is critical, as we move forward, that we focus our efforts on the most vulnerable, on the elderly, and the

immunocompromised. The average age of death from COVID in Alberta is 83, and I remind the House that the average life expectancy in the province is age 82. In Canada 95 per cent of fatalities from COVID are those over the age of 60, 80 per cent are in care facilities, and the risk of death from COVID for people under the age of 65 is 0.0006 per cent. We are learning more about this disease as we go through it, and what we are learning is that younger people, while not completely immune, have a rate of mortality related to COVID that is no higher than their general mortality rate for other illnesses. For most Albertans the risk of death from other pathogens, accidents, and traffic fatalities is actually higher than it is from COVID.

There will be more infections. There will be more outbreaks. There will be clusters. There will be more hospitalizations. Sadly, there will be more COVID-related deaths. But as we learn more about this, Mr. Speaker, I challenge our public health experts and our officials to ensure that our policy response is predicated on protecting the most vulnerable in the strongest and most discrete ways possible because we cannot continue indefinitely to impair the social and economic as well as the mental health and physiological health of the broader population for potentially a year through measures for an influenza that does not generally threaten life apart from the most elderly, the immunocompromised, and those with comorbidities.

10:30

Mr. Speaker, we can now proceed to the next stages of the relaunch with strong confidence and bold action to ensure a rapid and robust economic recovery. As the C.D. Howe report this week by leading economists and banks, including David Dodge, former governor of the Bank of Canada, said, "If there is a second wave, a second economy wide shutdown should be avoided in favor of more targeted approaches that are effective and avoid further erosion of public finances and the risk of hitting debt walls and loss of borrowing capacity."

Let me shift, then, to the economic front. Alberta's deficit, we estimate, this year will be \$20 billion. The hon. the Finance minister will be providing a more detailed update to the Assembly and Albertans in August. We understand that the national debt is now exceeding a trillion dollars. We must acknowledge that there are very significant social and economic costs to all of this, and that is why we must take, as I say, more focused responses such as, for example, continuing to step up our testing. And I'm pleased to say that thanks to the good work of people at Alberta Precision Laboratories, Alberta Health, Alberta Health Services, we now have the capacity to process about 9,000 COVID tests a day, and that is moving in early June to 16,000. If we get the participation, with requisite equipment, from private laboratories like, for example, DynaLife, we believe that Alberta would be able, actually, to process perhaps as many as 20,000 tests a day.

However, we are, on average, over the past week only processing 3,000 a day. I say "only," but that's still the highest per capita in Canada. That's partly because we are having difficulty getting enough subjects to come forward for asymptomatic testing. Albertans need to understand that, so we're refining our strategy to focus on periodic testing in congregate seniors' facilities, including long-term care facilities. The Minister of Health can provide additional updates on that.

We also encourage Albertans to download the ABTraceTogether app, which was initially modelled in Singapore. Apple and Google will be making revisions to the app to make it more user friendly. I'm speaking with all of the other Premiers about them potentially replicating this to become the platform for a national tracing app, which can help save lives. My message to people is: I know that

some people, understandably, don't want some government thing tracking where they are. That's not what this is. This is only information that's relevant if you come into contact with somebody who's tested positive for COVID, and it allows for instantaneous automated contact tracing, which allows us to step on outbreaks before they threaten the broader community. If we want to reopen, as we do, Mr. Speaker, then we must do things like this. This is how they've kept the spread so low in jurisdictions like Singapore while keeping their schools and their economies largely unaffected.

It's also critically important that we have rigorous border screening measures, which is why last week I announced that Alberta has the strongest measures for border screening, including infrared temperature scanners at ports of entry, at the Edmonton and Calgary airports for international arrivals as well as at the Coutts border crossing. We are requiring individuals to submit their self-isolation plan for 14 days upon arrival. If they do not have a credible plan or support for it, we will provide them with shelter for those 14 days. And we continue to work with the federal government to strengthen those measures.

At the same time, I'm challenging our officials and the Prime Minister and other Premiers to develop a strategy for ensuring a future for travel, including our tourism industry, in a pandemic environment like other jurisdictions – Australia, New Zealand, Austria, and Iceland, for example – are implementing.

Mr. Speaker, perhaps the most important strategy as we move forward is building a wall of defence around the most vulnerable, seniors in particular. As you know, the government of Alberta has taken extraordinary measures in that respect, including requiring that health care aides working in continuing care settings may only work in one facility to prevent prospective transmission, of course using PPE, and a number of other protocols which are supported concretely by Alberta's government with the \$170 million package of comprehensive supports announced by the Minister of Health last week for congregate seniors' care facilities.

Mr. Speaker, we can learn how to manage outbreaks from countries like Germany. Despite high overall infection and death rates, most of that country moved quickly out of their lockdown, which was more like a lockdown than in Alberta, and ahead of Alberta. As I've said from the beginning, we must protect both lives and livelihoods. This includes being increasingly cognizant of the mental and psychological health impacts of lockdowns. I'd like to inform the Assembly that the government has been tracking non-COVID-related health statistics, including for suicides and other morbidities, and at least based on the last data set I saw, we have not seen – we have not seen – an increase in the trends of deaths related to non-COVID health challenges. But we are concerned about the mental health impact of all of this, which is why Alberta's government has provided an additional \$53 million in support for COVID-related mental health interventions, much of it delivered by community organizations. That is in addition to the \$150 million mental health and addictions action plan that this government is implementing.

Just to put this in context, Alberta's funding for COVID-related mental health support is greater than the packages of all other nine provinces combined times two. We are taking the mental health challenge very seriously, and I wanted to commend the associate minister for his work and that of his officials in this respect. We from the very beginning focused on homeless shelters, Mr. Speaker. I can tell the House that the Emergency Management Cabinet Committee at every meeting has a specific update led by the hon. the Minister of Community and Social Services. We provided \$50 million right out of the gate in mid-March to support nonprofit and civil society organizations, with, I think, \$25 million set aside for homeless shelters. We have provided robust testing support, PPE,

funding for overflow capacity, isolation capacity, and I'm pleased to see that we have not seen a single fatality from our homeless population. One thing I think we're learning epidemiologically is that that population has a very high level of immune resistance, of immunity and resilience against an influenza of this nature.

Mr. Speaker, I'm running out of time, and I regret that I won't have time to go through in detail the scale of Alberta's enormous fiscal and economic response to the crisis. I will be happy to take questions in this respect, and my colleague the hon. the Minister of Finance will be detailing the elements of the \$13 billion in pandemic relief and economic stimulus provided by the government of Alberta through deferrals, liquidity measures, and cash.

We want Albertans to know that we will do everything within our means to protect both lives and livelihoods, families and job creators during this time in partnership with other orders of government. The government is developing its economic recovery strategy, which will include truly extraordinary measures to ensure that we come out of this crisis stronger than ever. Let me conclude with that, Mr. Speaker. I have confidence in the resilience of the people of Alberta. They have demonstrated that in remarkable ways in recent weeks. I am proud of the people of Alberta for taking on this challenge, for so far defeating this pandemic, and for showing great strength of character and optimism about the future, an optimism that has always characterized the people in the province of Alberta.

Thank you.

10:40

The Speaker: Hon. members, the Leader of the Opposition will now have 15 minutes to make a statement, and that statement will be followed by a period of 30 minutes, where the Leader of the Official Opposition and the Premier will engage in a debate.

The hon. the Leader of the Official Opposition.

Ms Notley: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. There's little doubt that the COVID-19 pandemic marks the biggest public health crisis that Alberta has faced in a generation, a massive challenge for our health system and indeed our entire economy. I want to start by offering, again, my deepest sympathy to the families of those who have lost loved ones to COVID-19 and indeed our support and sympathy for all those who have been impacted in one way or the other by this virus.

But I have to say that I, too, am very proud of the way that Albertans have pulled together to wrestle this pandemic to the ground, at least for the moment, by listening to the advice of the chief medical officer and maintaining physical distancing. I'm hugely proud of our front-line health workers – the nurses, the nursing aides, the care workers, the doctors, the specialists – all of whom have done so much to make sure that we are cared for.

This also goes for our essential workers across Alberta, who kept things running and made sure we had some sense of normal throughout much of this. Of course, we know that thanks are owed to direct public servants, who, frankly, probably haven't stopped working since, well, you know, early January in terms of putting together a response to this.

Amongst Albertans let me say that the stories of kindness have been heartwarming. People offering to pick up groceries, people dropping off food, people leaving messages of hope and support for one another in different ways: this is what it means to be Albertan, to be resilient, compassionate, and hopeful. It has led our province to see a positive change in case numbers and a sharp rise in recoveries. Albertans did the hard work, and we all deserve to be proud of our province and its citizens.

But this is also, Mr. Speaker, not the time to rest easy or to let our guard down. Now is actually the time when we must look at how the government responded to the pandemic and how to do better. The reason for this is because even though the waters have calmed for the moment, we must, if we are cautious and prudent, actually see the time that we are in as the eye of the hurricane, and we must use this time wisely to prepare for what most scientists tell us will be a second wave in the fall. So that's what I want to do today. It is the job of the Official Opposition to take a very thorough and exhaustive look at where we can do things better and push the government to do more, and we must do that for the benefit of all Albertans.

Let me start where families were hurt the most. We lost 139 Albertans to COVID-19, the majority of whom were residents of long-term care homes, where the outbreaks moved fast and struck hard. These Albertans were parents, grandparents, uncles, aunts, friends. We know now that these long-term care homes were not prepared for the dramatic impact the virus had on residents and staff in these facilities. The issue is that when confronted with these challenges, the government didn't move faster when it mattered most. While other provinces were stepping in to manage staffing levels, co-ordinate PPE supplies, and provide surge funding, Alberta waited. We called for these interventions and additional support in late March. We called for a 20 per cent increase to continuing care operators because administrators had concerns about their ability to protect seniors. Yet we didn't see announcements until a month later, and then it took till May 19 before that funding started to go out. We still don't know who has received funding or how much, and the promised \$2-per-hour wage top-up is still not universally in place.

We've heard from many of the families who lost loved ones, some of whose stories we shared here, and we owe it to them to move faster in the future. We need to know now: does every operator have enough staff? Have they been prohibited from working in more than one facility? Have the staff been compensated for that change? Do all the facilities actually have PPE now that is the right PPE? Has all the surge funding been delivered and tracked, and will it remain in place? All of this must be publicly reported and tracked. Why? Just to ensure that we are better prepared to fight the spread of COVID-19 in these high-risk populations should the second wave occur. If we don't, the result will be more pressure on our hospitals and our health care system as a whole.

Speaking of that, this pandemic is going to have a long-term impact on our health care system. We know we will be grappling with a backlog of thousands and thousands of surgeries that were either cancelled or postponed. It was unavoidable. It's nobody's fault, but it is real, and it is a problem that is there. We know that there is massive pressure to come and a tremendous amount of pent-up demand above and beyond the second wave, for which we should be planning.

We have to insist yet again that this government back off on its attack on our health care system. Our needs are great now, and they will only grow, yet these folks continue to wage war with doctors – doctors, Mr. Speaker – in a pandemic. They are driving medical professionals out of the province and especially out of rural Alberta. You think the backlog is bad now? Just wait till more and more rural Albertans start pulling into the city to seek health care. Costs and wait times will be pressured even further.

The Albertans with the least access to health care will begin to be the ones who suffer the most. There are 18 rural communities so far where doctors are either leaving or reducing service. Meanwhile, overall, instead of being left to focus on saving lives, doctors are going to court and suing the Premier to protect their constitutional rights.

On top of that, the government is still planning their layoffs of thousands of nurses and other front-line health workers. It seems the plan now is to resume that in September. Mr. Speaker, does this really sound like a good idea if we're preparing for a second wave? The government is literally dangling the sword of Damocles over the heads of these nurses and health care workers while they serve as our first line of defence. We need to seriously reassess this approach and stop these ill-advised plans.

Now, another place where I hope the government has learned some lessons is our workplaces. Let's talk about the Cargill plant in High River. This plant was home to the biggest outbreak of COVID-19 on the continent: 952 cases at one work site. It was only after the fact and because of several media investigations that we learned of the conditions that one worker described as, quote, a nightmare: management wearing PPE but offering nothing to their workers, workers incentivized not to call in sick, workers being told to come in despite positive test results, workers working elbow to elbow. And, surprise, surprise, none of this came up on the FaceTime OH and S inspections, inspections that came way too late and failed to properly engage workers.

Now, this government was warned for weeks about the risks. The workers through their union asked for a temporary shutdown as early as mid-March. Instead, the government told these workers, many of whom have language barriers, many of whom are very vulnerable, that it was safe. It wasn't, and by the end of March there were over 400 cases, and it had spread into the community. Three people connected to the outbreak have died, two of whom were workers in the plant. Once again, as we've said before, there will have to be an inquiry although we do agree it probably needs to come a bit later. But we must do it because we owe it to these families and indeed all Albertans to find out how the government could have done better.

Just this weekend we heard from the family of Benito Quesada, a UFCW 401 shop steward who was among the first to raise concerns. He came to Alberta from Mexico to build a better life for his family. He worked day and night to achieve that dream. This is what his 16-year-old daughter had to say to the *Calgary Herald*, quote: my dad told us that there was no distancing between any of the workers; he was disappointed because everywhere else around the world they were going to extremes to prevent their workers from getting sick but not at Cargill.

Just because something is deemed an essential service does not mean that they don't still need to be protected. In fact, it's more challenging for vulnerable workers like those at Cargill to stand up for themselves and follow the recommendations of the chief medical officer of health. It's the government that sets the standards for safety in these workplaces and every workplace. Workers don't have control over how to do their jobs safely. The employer makes that decision, and as such it is up to the government to establish and enforce standards. That is why worker engagement is also key and why when we were in government, we implemented mandatory joint work-site health and safety committees, committees that have since been dispensed with by this government as red tape.

We believe that one of the most important roles of Alberta Labour is the education, engagement, and empowerment of both employers and workers to understand and exercise their responsibilities and to intervene where either party falls short, but in failing to understand the basic fact that workers don't control their workplace – the employer does – we end up with practices where employees feel forced to do work that is unsafe. That's what happened in Cargill, and that is why the government fundamentally failed in this regard at that site.

Here's the thing. We must do better, and we must learn from this experience. We must learn from what happened in this workplace

in order to ensure that as we move into relaunch, this experience is not repeated in work site after work site after work site across this province. We must protect those workers.

10:50

I want to talk about support programs for a moment. I think it's clear that the vast majority of the response to COVID-19 that people are actually getting and feeling and seeing in their fingers and their hands has come through the federal government. They launched programs like the CERB, the wage subsidy program to provide support for students, businesses, and so on. But this pandemic has also underscored the need to look closely at our employment standards, especially sick leave, and on that matter I support working with the federal government on paid sick leave. Let me be clear. Yes, this is expensive, but the cost of having sick or infected workers come into the workplace because they can't afford to stay home will definitely ensure a resurgence in the virus, and it will ultimately cost our economy and our government's balance sheet even more.

Now, I know we are all anxious for things to get back to business as usual – I know I am – but we have to understand that business as usual is still a ways off. A recent survey says that 56 per cent of small-business owners say that they are in bad shape and that 45 per cent are actually planning more layoffs. There are roughly 750,000 Albertans whose jobs depend on the survival of these small businesses. Alberta businesses need more than debt and deferral from their provincial government. They need real support with PPE, with rebuilding inventory, with handling the impact of costs like utilities, insurance, commercial rent, and in some cases with physical redesign. Regardless of whether or not we see a second wave in the fall, we may be in for a second wave of business closures if the government does not act soon to support these businesses. If we do see a second wave that forces us to take a step back, well, then we need to really be prepared to support these businesses.

Going forward into future phases and future preparations, we also can improve. We need actual guidelines with specific measures. The phase 1 guidelines arrived two days before phase 1 was put in place, and they were not prescriptive enough. Many businesses were actually using Ontario's guidelines to get ready. And we need more notice. Calgaryans were blindsided by this cabinet's decision to delay phase 1 for some businesses, and while we understand that it was relying on the advice of the chief medical officer of health, the government could easily have foreshadowed that this was a question well in advance of the ultimate decision. In failing to do so, we saw a huge loss for many businesses throughout the city of Calgary.

The federal commercial rent program is broken as well, and it needs to be fixed as soon as possible. If the feds don't do it, the province needs to step up. Rent is due in five days. If the government can't find a way to make it work in time, then they have to pass a commercial eviction ban. In fact, just yesterday the Alberta Chambers of Commerce, the Retail Council of Canada, Restaurants Canada, and the CFIB all wrote letters to the Premier asking for this measure. No one wants to see businesses that fought hard through the recession go under because of the pandemic. We can't have businesses reopen their doors just to have a going-out-of-business sale sign go up.

I urge the government to act fast. Our caucus will support and expedite any of these measures as we resume the sitting.

Lastly, we need to have a conversation about where our economy is heading in the long term postpandemic. This is a recession unlike any other we have faced, and it will take a recovery plan that is equally inventive to come out of this successfully. We want to get

back to firing on all cylinders and resume our place as the economic powerhouse of Canada. To do that, we need bold and courageous leadership, yet the plan presented in the last two budgets is uninspired, to say the least. It ignored the need to diversify, and it led to severe job losses before the pandemic. A large percentage of people who've lost their jobs since are women, and the government has yet to talk about the hospitality sector or education or child care. The chief members of their so-called economic recovery task force are in the newspapers calling for extreme cuts. The same bad ideas didn't work when times were good, and they certainly won't work now.

Overall, I think what we need to be doing is focusing on growing our economy. This means that we can't sacrifice our own postsecondary institutions and slash funding to public education at the expense of our kids. We don't pursue American-style, for-profit health care, fighting with doctors, and mass firing of nurses and health care aides. We can't abandon environmental responsibilities and the economic benefits of clean energy. We don't belittle growing sectors like the arts, like new technology, digital entertainment, and artificial intelligence. Ultimately, we need an economic recovery that is built on a diversified economic plan, where everyone gets a fair shot, where everyone does their fair share, and where everyone plays by the same rules.

Brighter days are ahead. I agree with the Premier on that. We will get through this by building on the strength of Albertans, by building on their creativity, on their perseverance, and on their can-do attitude. The entrepreneurial spirit of Alberta will not be broken by this pandemic, but it must be harnessed to rebuild an economy that is truly diversified and truly serves all citizens of this province.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I look forward to this debate.

The Speaker: Hon. members, we will now enter into a period of 30 minutes where the Leader of the Official Opposition and the Premier will have an exchange. Neither the Premier nor the Leader of the Official Opposition will make a statement that exceeds two minutes at a time.

The hon. the Leader of the Official Opposition.

Ms Notley: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I want to carry on on sort of one of the principal components of what I built my remarks around, which is this idea that most experts suggest that we must be prepared for a second wave. You know, the Premier talked about not wanting to shut down the economy if there is a second wave, and I think that in order to pursue that objective – and I'm not entirely sure the degree to which we'll be able to – we need to remain very attuned to the evidence as we move forward.

But what is very clear and what we learned from what's passed so far is that vulnerable workers tend to also be essential workers. Outside of health care and certain public service functions, our most vulnerable workers also can be our most essential. What happens is that they have very few rights in the workplace. So if the economy is going again, we must ensure that those workers are empowered to make the decision to stay home if they suffer from symptoms, if they get ill, if they are exposed to somebody, in order to ensure that we do not have the kind of outbreaks in workplaces that we saw at Cargill but potentially in other places as well.

To do that, though, we cannot ask those very vulnerable workers to take two weeks without pay. We can't do that. They won't be able to afford it. They will put their kids' food higher up on the priority list than taking the steps to stay away from work. So my question to the Premier is: will you support the push for paid sick leave for working people over the course of the pandemic?

The Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Mr. Kenney: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I thank the hon. the Leader of the Opposition for her speech, her constructive spirit, her recommendations, and also her concern for vulnerable workers in essential occupations, who have done so much to care for the elderly through this crisis.

Mr. Speaker, that's in part why the government at the very beginning of the pandemic provided greater flexibility and protection for workers needing to take time away from work through ministerial orders that modified the labour code and ensured that people could take time off work without penalty. It's also why the government immediately introduced – I think we were one of only two provinces to do so – the emergency support payments, which totalled over \$100 million and went to, I believe, some 85,000 Albertans, precisely to address the problem she raises, to provide immediate income support for people who needed to take time off work because of illness.

I do note that those individuals can now also receive the Canada emergency response benefit, which has been extended, from the government of Canada, and I would be happy to look at other submissions. I do know that the hon. Minister of Labour and Immigration is working on a further package of support for essential service workers. In partnership with the government of Canada we are prepared to contribute our portion of that cost-shared program to provide a wage top-up for designated essential service workers during this time.

Ms Notley: Well, thank you very much to the Premier, Mr. Speaker, but that doesn't actually answer my question.

We are aware that the government amended the Employment Standards Code so that people could not be fired if they stayed away from work in order to keep themselves and/or their co-workers safe. However, they were not and currently are not eligible for sick leave during that period of time. Now, I appreciate that the government did subsequently come out with the emergency isolation benefit, which was accessed by some people but certainly not all the people who were eligible for it because, of course, the cut-off happened when it happened, and there were all the problems, that we're all aware of, with respect to the application process. So our estimates are that probably 1 in 3 folks that were eligible actually got access to it. The difficulty is that CERB starts after that two weeks has been exhausted, and it will go for a period of time, and then it will stop.

11:00

But if what we're looking at is another 12 to 18 months of trying to carefully tune the machine so that the economy can continue going for the next 12 to 18 months before there is any solution – hopefully, there is a solution in the form of a vaccine – then we still are going to have people repeatedly having these issues. They won't necessarily be deemed essential, but they will be vulnerable workers whose role in the economy is critically important. We saw how critically important they were when their businesses and the work that they did was shut down over the course of the last six weeks. I'm not talking about essential service workers, and I'm not talking about the two weeks from the spring; I'm talking about what happens to folks who do not have access to sick leave now over the course of the next 12 to 18 months. That's something that the federal government is pushing, that's something that other provinces are pushing, and that's something that we understand this Premier has not been supportive of. Will he change his position now?

Mr. Kenney: Well, there have been discussions with the Council of the Federation and in the first ministers' meeting in this respect,

Mr. Speaker. As I say, the hon. the Minister of Labour and Immigration is reviewing this and related questions, and I believe, in fact, he'll be one of the ministers presenting an update to the Assembly this afternoon and will be available for specific questions. We are looking at that entire area to see whether additional actions are necessary.

The Speaker: The Leader of the Opposition.

Ms Notley: Well, thank you very much. Again, I guess I'm not really hearing a yes there, and that's ultimately what we're going to need to hear. You know, this is not just sort of a human rights thing and an income support and an antipoverty thing, but it is also a public health thing because people, particularly minimum wage workers or close to minimum wage workers, cannot afford to lose two weeks' pay every time they get a cold or the sniffles, which is what the chief medical officer of health will be telling them to do and what they should do. So the question becomes: how do we help them do that? I haven't heard an answer yet. I think the sooner that all levels of government and all Premiers and the Prime Minister get to work on that, the sooner we can start thinking about practical ways for businesses to effectively reopen.

I'd like to switch gears just a little bit. I know that there will be an opportunity to ask questions of the Finance minister in more detail, but I'd just like to ask the Premier this. We've, of course, had quite a raucous debate over the budget that was budget-ish that kind of sort of went through-ish this House at the beginning of March, and at the time the Premier suggested that there would be a debate in this House and a review of the fiscal situation of the province in this House between now and the end of summer. We've yet to hear from any member across there when or how this will be happening, so I'm wondering if the Premier can tell us, through this House, when Albertans will hear about some of the critical components of the fiscal path forward for the province of Alberta given that he had suggested we would in the next couple of months.

Mr. Kenney: Mr. Speaker, I thank the member for the question. First of all, I have to chuckle at her characterization of the budget that was approved by the Assembly as budget-ish. It was a budget that authorized the spending of \$56 billion, more than has been spent by the government of Alberta ever in history. But, of course, for the NDP that's just a budget lite. It's never enough.

I am proud that this Assembly worked around the clock to ensure the approval of that budget at a time when we had, I believe, 17 members of the government caucus who were in self-isolation because of illness or travel and several who were awaiting tests. We didn't know if the Assembly would be able to continue to sit or would be impaired by the pandemic, so I take exception to her characterization of the process.

Mr. Speaker, it is, I believe, the intention of the hon. Minister of Finance to present Albertans with the outlines of Alberta's bold economic recovery strategy next month, in the month of June, and then to come forward with a comprehensive fiscal update for the government of Alberta in August and then to proceed with fixed budget date legislation and a full budget for the subsequent fiscal year in February 2021.

Of course, the Leader of the Opposition will know that there continues to be enormous volatility in global financial markets and energy prices in our own economy, so the update itself will be the best information we have at that point in time, but the underlying numbers continue to shift quite significantly.

The Speaker: The Leader of the Opposition.

Ms Notley: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I would suggest to the Premier that he's almost sounding like a New Democrat there, or what they characterize as New Democrats inaccurately, when he refers to a budget as being all about spending. Here's the thing. Budgets typically involve money out, money in, and the budget that was introduced in March, of course, had profound failures. I believe the Finance minister felt that Rome was burning behind him, to use his language, in terms of the money-in piece. Yet, you know, we were continuing to spend billions and billions of dollars in corporate tax cuts and lots of other things when we should have been able to have a debate on that, and we didn't do that because we also, of course, cut the debate by about two-thirds.

Nonetheless, I want to go back to the answer that the Premier just gave. Obviously, if there's a report in August, the current plan as far as we can tell is that we will not be sitting. So is it now the plan to have that report presented to the Legislature? My understanding from the Premier was that the August report would actually be presented and discussed and debated in the Legislature, and what we've heard is that in fact that's not currently the plan. If that's changing, please let us know. If it's the, quote, unquote, bold June strategy that we will be discussing in the Legislature, again I ask for sort of details around the forum within which that will be happening.

Either way, we all know, all Albertans know that our revenue streams have been significantly impaired, and we should not be waiting until February to try and track down what the consequences of that are and what the significantly impactful decisions around that are. Albertans shouldn't have to play catch-up. We should have an open conversation in this House.

The Speaker: The hon. the Premier.

Mr. Kenney: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. First of all, on the substance of – the Leader of the Opposition referred to revenue projections, and I will remind her that her last fiscal presentation to this Assembly as Premier projected west Texas intermediate oil prices of \$72 a barrel. My party's election platform took the very unusual step of significantly reducing revenue projections from the baseline presented by the government based on a \$64 projection, that was 14 months ago. The budget tabled by the Finance minister this spring was predicated on a \$58 WTI, which was essentially the average amongst private-sector projections. So to have the NDP accuse the government, which reduced by 20 per cent that very important projection, of having somehow gilded the lily is absurd.

Mr. Speaker, in terms of the process, it would be optimal, I agree with the Opposition Leader, for the Finance minister to be able to present a comprehensive fiscal update to the Assembly to allow a debate on it. His officials indicate that they need until August to get a proper read and revise projections on the fiscal update. I'd be happy to work with the Leader of the Opposition. If the Assembly is not sitting, then perhaps we could do that in front of a committee of the Legislature. We want to do what we can to allow for accountability and debate, but we all know that the timelines with which we are now operating are peculiar because of the pandemic. Perhaps we could look at bringing the Assembly back for a limited period in August. I'd be happy to if people are willing to give up more days of their summer. I'm sure they'd be willing to do so. I think that we can work something out to ensure a proper presentation to the Legislature or indirectly through a committee.

The Speaker: I'm merely a humble servant of the Assembly, so I, too, hope we can sit during August.

The Leader of the Official Opposition.

Ms Notley: Well, thank you very much. Just in terms of the Premier's comments with respect to our projections and their projections around the price of oil, let me be very clear. The last budget that we tabled actually came in with a deficit at least about a billion below what we projected. I believe that we're going to see, in fact, that we overperformed in all of those cases, and, in fact, our deficit will end up having been smaller than both the deficits that will be recorded by this government, not just the pandemic one but the preceding one as well.

11:10

Nonetheless, I would just like to say that we would be quite interested in having a good committee structure, preferably in a place where there's lots of excellent high-tech capacity to have a robust conversation about the details of the fiscal plan. Whether that be in August or whether it be in September or whenever, I would urge the Premier to follow up and keep his word on that issue because suggesting that we wait until February before we have a detailed conversation about the consequences of our fiscal situation is too much to ask Albertans.

I'd like to move on really quickly to a different matter, which is around health and safety. Certainly, as I mentioned a few times, our labour critic asked the minister of labour way back in the very, very beginning of March whether or not he would be hiring more health and safety inspectors, and I think there was a little sort of pat on the head and: we can handle it. So my question is: if we're looking forward to moving forward on the economy, will there be more hired?

Mr. Kenney: Well, Mr. Speaker, I thank the Leader of the Opposition for the question. It is one that I will refer to the hon. the Minister of Labour and Immigration, who will be presenting this afternoon, because I don't have detailed information in that respect. I'm looking at my officials, and I don't think they do either.

But, Mr. Speaker, since she raised the subject in her opening remarks about an online inspection of the Cargill plant led by OHS officials, I think the Opposition Leader knows – I hope she does, and I'd be happy to inform her now – that throughout the course of the spring there were also in-person inspections by OHS at that site and other meat-packing plants, so she's being somewhat disingenuous. I'm not an expert on OHS protocols and practices, but my understanding is that for many years that branch of the ministry of labour has supplemented in-person inspections of workplaces with virtual inspections. That, I understand, was a practice that was observed under the previous NDP government, so it was not an innovation. It wasn't done uniquely for this circumstance. I agree with her intuitively that, especially when you're talking about a big, complex facility like a meat-packing plant, there should be in-person inspections, and I'm told there have been in this instance.

In terms of hiring additional staff, I will again refer that to the Minister of Labour and Immigration.

The Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Ms Notley: Well, thank you. Frankly, first of all, when we were in government, of course, we also had a number of other legislative provisions in place that helped workers to keep their work sites safe, which have since been characterized as red tape and removed. You know, when you remove health and safety committees, when you dilute workers' rights in the workplace, it is unfortunately necessary to have more government boots on the ground in order to ensure that rules are followed, which they clearly were not here. Frankly, the reports that we heard from the union were that their concerns went unanswered. If there were actually people on the ground from

health and safety, as opposed to public health, that walked by the kinds of things that we were seeing, then we have a much bigger problem inherent in the department of labour there.

Either way, the reality is that there are many, many, many workplaces that were not deemed essential that are now reopening, that involve vulnerable workers, and we must be ensuring that we are putting in place real safety protocols. The culture in this province is not one, unfortunately, that has focused on that over many, many years, so I would urge this government to significantly tool up on that front. But there'll be more debate on that going forward.

The Premier has talked a lot about the app for tracing. I don't want to get into a long, detailed discussion about the shortfalls of that app and the uptake on it, but what I would like to know is: how many more human people are going to be hired to engage in the work of tracing? Most of the evidence out there suggests that that is at this point the only proven way of doing the kind of tracing necessary to reduce infections.

The Speaker: For the benefit of all members, there are 10 minutes remaining in the initial 30 minutes of the debate.

Mr. Kenney: Mr. Speaker, I thank the hon. leader for, I think, a very pertinent question, a question that I've actually been asking. I am advised by the Department of Health that we have an adequate complement of personnel to work on tracing and tracking. In fact, very early in the pandemic Alberta Health Services engaged a number of medical students to supplement the workforce that was already involved in tracing and tracking. I believe that we have performed more strongly than any other province with respect to tracing and tracking. That partly was supported by our very high levels of testing. We're joined here by the Deputy Minister of Health, who advises that the department believes and the public health branch of the department believes that with 412 people designated for tracing and tracking, we have an adequate workforce in that respect.

Ms Notley: Okay. Well, I will leave it to further questions for people to unpack the evidence on that because it's not my understanding that that is actually what best practices would suggest is the adequate amount. I would just ask if we could clarify ultimately: how many of those trackers are volunteer versus paid? I know that a number of those medical students were actually volunteers. Have we moved into a practice of actually having full-time, paid trackers or tracers or whatever they are doing?

The other area, of course, that I want to try to touch on just very briefly, although we will get into it more, I have no doubt, is the issue of the forward planning with respect to the health care plans that we can summarize as the letters that went out in the fall of 2019, followed by the rather disastrous approach to dealing with the doctors that we've seen roll out rather painfully over the last six months or so. Our view, notwithstanding the good hopes of the Premier, is that we need to plan for another wave and that pressures on our health care system over the next few years as a result are going to grow substantially. I would like to know: is it still the plan of this government to execute the plans that were laid out in the letters to the AUPE, the HSAA, CUPE, UNA – and I know I'm missing at least one right now, and I apologize – in the fall of 2019 that were written and sent out by AHS?

Mr. Kenney: I thank the Leader of the Opposition. First of all, allow me to assure her that the 412 people who are working on our tracing and tracking team are compensated. They're not volunteers, including the medical students who have complemented the workforce. It's a very substantial capacity. Mr. Speaker, quite

frankly, as the number of new cases abates and as we move into the summer, when we typically see the abatement of influenzas, I'm confident we're going to have significant excess capacity. So this is an area where we're going to need a surge capacity to hire more people if we see a second wave in the fall, but likely we will not require the same level of workforce on tracing and tracking in the middle of the summer that we've had at the height of the pandemic.

With respect to physician compensation, I would remind the Leader of the Opposition that the budget adopted by this House included a specific line item of \$5.4 billion for physician compensation, which represents zero cuts in physician compensation after they had enjoyed a 20 per cent increase in overall billings and compensation under the previous government and a 298 per cent increase since 2001, over the last 18, 19 years. Mr. Speaker, we have the best compensated physicians in Canada by far, on average 20 per cent better compensated than in comparable provinces. All we ask is for the ability to ensure that we don't continue to see uncontrolled growth in that, the single largest area of public-sector compensation.

The hon. Leader of the Opposition mischaracterizes the letters to which she refers. They were not plans to lay people off. They were the government discharging its collective bargaining obligation to indicate the total maximum number of positions that could potentially be affected, but it was not actually our intention to affect that number of positions.

The Speaker: The Leader of the Official Opposition.

11:20

Ms Notley: Well, thank you very much. So it sounds to me like those plans are still under way, and the point that I was trying to make is that we are entering into a period of the single greatest pressure on our health care system probably in its history.

I mean, it's strange. We didn't have as many patients as we had planned, and that's good news, but it still cost us to plan for them. So we took a whole bunch of health care that Albertans need, and we just pushed it down the road. Then, on top of that, most experts agree that there will be a second wave in the fall, so the reality is that the actual, real demand on our health care system, whether the Premier likes it or not, is going to shoot up considerably. The real demand, where Albertans go to the doctor asking for help, asking to be made well, asking to be made safe, asking to be treated: that real demand is going to go up significantly from where it was when the plans were made by the Premier and his Health minister and his Finance minister to make the kinds of cuts that he's currently defending.

My question is: understanding that that demand is going to increase significantly – and that doesn't account for the changes that I hope will be made on a permanent basis to our long-term care sector – the reality is that there's greater demand, so why are they not reconsidering these cuts? We're not dealing with the same level of demand. I actually think that the cuts were wrong in the first place for a thousand reasons – and we debated that, and we'll continue to debate it – but we're actually in a new scenario now, where our health care system has much more call for its services. Yet these folks seem to think that we're going to pretend like nothing has happened, and it doesn't make sense to me. Why would we not recalibrate, reconsider, make better plans to keep Albertans safe?

The Speaker: Hon. Premier, there are three minutes remaining, and you have two minutes to answer.

Mr. Kenney: Mr. Speaker, the reason the government is not reconsidering cuts is because it never considered cuts in the first

place. The only cuts to the health care budget that exist are a figment of the opposition leader's very creative imagination.

Mr. Speaker, the government is maintaining its electoral public health guarantee to Albertans to maintain or increase the budget for health care. In fact, the budget for health care embedded in the budget adopted by this Assembly a few weeks ago represented a \$600 million increase in the Health budget, \$100 million of which was embedded prior to the pandemic and the half-billion dollar surge in additional resources. So let me repeat for clarity: there are no health care cuts, no health care cuts have been proposed, and no health care cuts will be proposed.

Having said that, Albertans understand that we need to get better results from what is the most expensive health system in the country, where we spend 20 per cent more per person than the average of Canadian provinces even though we have the youngest population and therefore should have the least expensive health care and even though we are behind many provinces in areas like life expectancy, infant mortality, and surgical wait times. I know that for the Leader of the Opposition always spending more, even with declining outcomes, is the socialist approach, but it's not the Alberta approach. Albertans expect us to work with our tremendous health care officials and front-line workers to find better ways of getting better services without always spending more than everyone else.

The Speaker: There's one minute remaining for the Leader of the Official Opposition.

Ms Notley: Well, thank you very much. I actually think, Mr. Speaker, that what Albertans expect is to have health care there for them and their families and their loved ones when they need it. That's what I think Albertans expect.

Moreover, cuts – this is a rhetorical game that the Premier is playing, and anyone who follows this debate understands that he's playing a rhetorical game, and it's rather disingenuous. If he suggests that this is a figment of our imagination, apparently the doctors are lying. Apparently, the nurses are lying. Apparently, people who can't get access to service are lying. I don't think they are, so it is not a figment of our imagination. It is us relaying the real, genuine concerns of Albertans, as we were elected to do, to this government, and I would urge them to stop name-calling and, instead, to hear those concerns, Mr. Speaker. The pressure on health care will go up. We're either going to have a government that protects Albertans or a government that throws their health care under the bus.

The Speaker: I hesitate to interrupt. However, the time for debate in this period has now elapsed.

We will move to a period of debate where the Minister of Health will have 10 minutes to make a statement, and that will be followed by a period of question and answer of up to 50 minutes.

The hon. the Minister of Health.

Mr. Shandro: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure to be back in this Chamber. It's a pleasure, in particular, to be able to speak about the pandemic and our government's response and to take questions about our government's response to the pandemic.

I'd like to begin, as the Premier and the Leader of the Opposition did, by extending my condolences to the families and the friends of those who have been lost to the pandemic.

The pandemic here in our province has posed an unprecedented challenge for Albertans. First, our government did everything in its ability, in its power, and in its resources to protect Albertans, but we did not do it alone. As the Premier noted, we did it with the help

of Albertans themselves. Now we are doing everything in our power, again with the help of Albertans, to relaunch the businesses that were affected by the pandemic, to broaden services throughout the province while still keeping people safe. I'm proud to stand here and to speak of both the challenges that we've faced and the successes that we've seen over the past few months.

The people of this province have shown strength, courage, and understanding as well in the face of something that none of us have ever experienced before. Albertans throughout the pandemic did the right thing, and in doing so, they protected each other, they protected the capacity of our health system, and they protected our nurses, our doctors, and others who are working in the system.

We have an excellent system, with professionals who are working day and night to keep us safe and to beat the virus. You know, often in front of the cameras folks at home will see either me, Dr. Hinshaw, or our Premier in front of the microphones and the cameras responding and answering questions of the media about our response to the pandemic, and regrettably there are a lot of people who are involved in our response who don't get the credit they deserve.

I think that begins with the deputy minister for the Ministry of Health, Deputy Minister Lorna Rosen, who has directed 600 people in the ministry who have helped to respond to this pandemic. Thank you to all 600 of those, in particular the 15 people in the chief medical officer of health's office. You know, a lot of people forget that there are others in that office, in particular Dr. Marcia Johnson, the deputy MOH. Thank you to her. We have many MOHs in the system, quite frankly, and most of them work in AHS, so thank you to the MOHs and the deputy MOHs throughout the five zones. AHS's most senior MOH, Dr. Laura McDougall: thank you to her.

The people who work in the emergency operation centres throughout AHS, including the main one at East Lake and the ones in each of the five zones: thank you to those folks who have been doing that work. Thank you to Dr. Verna Yiu, who is the president and CEO of AHS; members of her ELT, executive leadership team, in particular Deb Gordon and Brenda Huband – the Premier mentioned Jitendra Prasad, or JP, who is the head of procurement – and as well our two incident commanders, who have helped to direct the response, Sherri Wilson and Graham Statt. As well, senior ADM Bryce Stewart is here with us today and helped us, in particular, to develop our modelling to be able to make sure that we had the capacity in our system to respond to this pandemic.

Because of the work of all those people, we have the lowest level of hospitalizations, we have the lowest ICU admissions, the lowest deaths per capita among the large Canadian provinces, and we continue to be a world leader in testing. By following the advice of the chief medical officer of health, we keep the impact on our communities and our health system far below the early projections, and I'm grateful to report that the vast majority of people, more than 6,000, have now recovered out of the fewer than 7,000 cases that we've seen in this province.

Testing is also showing that our hospitals are safe. As of May 19 more than 22,000 hospital staff were tested for COVID. Of those staff 214 tested positive. That's less than 1 per cent of the total cases to date, and only 30 of those staff are believed to actually have acquired the virus while in the workplace. If we look at doctors working in our hospitals, 1,342 of them have been tested for COVID. Out of those, 27 tested positive, and none has been confirmed to have acquired the virus while at work.

11:30

That data shows that our health care staff are doing a tremendous job of preventing transmissions of the virus and keeping themselves and patients in the province safe. Hospital staff and physicians, as

we know, put themselves at risk every day, and our EMS workers as well. As we remember that this week is national Paramedic Services Week, we're supporting these folks on the front line with effective safety measures thanks to the efforts of the staff themselves, the support of AHS management, and the day-to-day work of infection control clinicians.

We also know that the residents in our continuing care system – that includes our long-term care facilities, 16,000 beds, as you know, Mr. Speaker; 11,300 in our DSL, or designated supportive living, facilities; our seniors' lodges – are at the highest risk from the virus. I'm very much aware of the toll that COVID has taken on staff and residents in these facilities, their families, and our government is committed to doing everything that we can to help. Last week I announced additional funding of more than \$14 million per month, or \$170 million per year, to these operators, and this funding is retroactive to March 15. It will cover enhanced staffing as well as costs for cleaning supplies, the loss of accommodation revenue due to vacant beds and rent freezes, and it will be maintained throughout all stages of our relaunch until the public health orders are lifted and the threat of COVID-19 has passed.

Now, this \$170 million is new funding in addition to previously announced funding to increase health care aide staff levels. We know that at the beginning of the response we started to see absenteeism in this important profession, who make up most of the staff in these long-term care facilities, so we topped up the wages by \$2 per hour to be able to address the retention and recruitment issue. Operators received \$12.4 million on May 8, and the wage top-up is being paid out retroactive to April 20. It's essential that we ensure that these facilities have the tools and resources they need to protect the residents and staff, and it's also a critical part of our relaunch strategy.

As well, before the pandemic we announced a review of our continuing care legislation in this province. There are, as you know, Mr. Speaker, six different pieces of legislation, six different regs, three different standards. We had tasked the hon. Member for Calgary-Fish Creek to chair a review of this legislation, and I'm very happy to report that the scope of this review is being expanded to include a review of the entire system, to work with our contracted operators in the system as well as AHS and Covenant to be able to look at the entire system as a whole. We need to get Albertans back to work and enjoying this province, but in order to do that, we need to protect the people who are the most at risk. That's why that review is going to be important.

Alberta is well positioned as we begin to move forward. Two weeks ago the province entered stage 1 of our relaunch strategy. Now, COVID still poses a threat. Of course, we must all continue to do our part to limit the spread, and most people are doing that successfully. I'm pleased to see a continuing downward trend in our active cases. I think it was 715 as of yesterday, Mr. Speaker.

While it's too early to see the full impact of relaunch, so far the numbers are promising in the province. Especially in Calgary and Brooks we've seen continued progress. I know that Calgary and Brooks look forward to catching up with the rest of the province in the coming days as their stage 1 of relaunch was phased over a period of weeks. Businesses in our province are showing incredible resilience throughout this pandemic, and we're proud to show them our support. The province's Biz Connect website is providing health and safety guidelines to workplaces, sector-specific guidelines, for stage 1 of the relaunch. Businesses are encouraged to check the website for new and upgraded guidance documents.

Mr. Speaker, as I see that I am running out of time, I'd like to also remind folks that we're very proud to see that since May 4 we have begun to relaunch our surgeries in the province and begun to see actually more than 3,000 non-urgent day surgeries already

having been completed. Happy to see, again, maternity services returning to some of the hospitals such as the south campus in Calgary and the High River hospital.

Mr. Speaker, I'm very happy to have the debate today. I would remind people that as we're in this together still, we remain together vigilant in the fight of the pandemic. Happy to take any questions.

The Speaker: Hon. members, we will now enter into a period of 50 minutes where any private member may ask a question that may not exceed two minutes in duration, and the minister will have up to two minutes to respond to that question. I might remind members of Government Motion 19:

Be it resolved that despite any standing order and immediately on the passage of this motion the Assembly is to debate the urgent public matter of the COVID-19 pandemic for the purposes of receiving and considering further developments since the Assembly's April 1, 2020, debate relating to the pandemic.

I encourage members to ensure that their questions to the minister are, in fact, pandemic related.

Is there anyone that has a question for the hon. minister? I see the hon. Member for Central Peace-Notley has risen first.

Mr. Loewen: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, and thank you, Minister, for being here today. I have three basic questions. Can we have general COVID guidelines for businesses and organizations with similar activities instead of trying to list different businesses and organization types? If the COVID guidelines are for public safety, why would activities like visiting a doctor, dentist, hairdresser, physiotherapist, chiropractor, tattoo artist, massage therapist, and activities that require similar hands-on activity be treated differently? The same goes for sports – indoor, outdoor, contact, and noncontact – and gatherings such as bars and churches, et cetera. Without this clear direction we have situations like the barrel-racing organization that had written permission from AHS for their two-day event, only to have it cancelled in the middle by a different AHS employee. If the guidelines are not clear, there's room for confusion, even within the governing body.

Question 2. I think it was wise to be wary of international travellers, but I understand that 184 of 195 countries of the world have admitted COVID cases. The horse is out of the barn, so to speak. What should matter now is how these countries are responding and testing for COVID. So the question is: should visitors from all countries be treated the same way as they enter our province? Do they all need a two-week quarantine or isolation? Would one week be sufficient? As we try to get our economy back on track, these seemingly small differences can make huge differences to business and workers in Alberta.

Question 3: when will we be starting antibody testing in Alberta, and how widespread and extensive can the antibody testing be? Knowing that there is asymptomatic spread and that the virus affects different people differently, would this not be valuable information for Albertans?

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Health.

Mr. Shandro: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the hon. member for the questions. The purpose for the guidelines – and I would remind the House that we do have general guidelines for workplaces although many businesses did reach out to us to ask, if they had sector-specific questions, for us to be able to answer them. That's why we have the general guidelines, to be able to address generally workplaces but also just do our best so that people can know how to keep their patrons, keep their staff safe. That's why we've had the specific guidelines as well.

Because the hon. member mentioned some allied health professions like chiropractors and dentists – a lot of that is going to be up to, quite frankly, those colleges to be able to work with their members so that they can provide profession-specific guidelines to their members to keep their staff and clients or patients safe. We will defer to those colleges to be able to take our general workplace guidelines, the recommendations of the chief medical officer of health and to do their best to make sure that their members and staff and clients or patients are safe.

I do take the feedback from the member, the concern about consistency in the event that he mentioned. After that happened and the feedback that I did receive from the member, we have passed that on to AHS to make sure that we are addressing concerns that Albertans might have about consistency about a decision that might have come from a medical officer of health and then later an Albertan understanding that there may have been a goalpost moved on them.

Should visitors be treated the same? We have a global pandemic, Mr. Speaker – I'm sorry. I'll try my best to answer the questions.

11:40

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

Mr. Shepherd: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate the opportunity to ask some questions here in this debate to hold the government to account on its handling of COVID-19. I join the minister in applauding all of the front-line health care workers and indeed everyone within our public health care system who's been essential and indeed central to us coming through this as well as we have.

Along those lines, I am continuing to hear from those front-line care workers about concerns with the quality of some of the personal protective equipment, particularly masks, that is being distributed to them, issues including a foul smell, skin irritation, easily broken elastics, nosepieces that won't hold their shape to form a proper seal. Indeed, at Paramedic Services Week just this past Monday I spoke with paramedics who told me that these are still the masks that they are receiving and are being required to use. So my question to the minister is: why is the government still providing substandard equipment to front-line health care workers? At what point do we expect to exhaust the supplies of this problematic personal protective equipment? Have we taken steps, then, to ensure we have a stock of equipment that is not detrimental to our front-line health care workers that indeed are required to use it?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Health.

Mr. Shandro: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To return to Central Peace-Notley's questions, "Should visitors from different countries be treated differently?" the concern I would have is that it is a global pandemic. We have the spread of COVID throughout the world, in every nation, so we will continue to have increased measures at our international airports and land border crossings to be able to address that.

Antibody testing is a fantastic question. I would remind the member, though, that it takes 10 to 14 days for an antibody to be able to develop in the bloodstream, so it is going to be a snapshot in time. It's not at this time something that could be used for a diagnosis purpose, but it could help us with surveillance. As we see our first antibody test now being approved by Health Canada, AHS is still, also through ProvLab, doing their work to understand which tests they're most interested in using for surveillance. Maybe at some point in the future, if it can be used for diagnosis – but my understanding is that that probably wouldn't be the case.

When it comes to the PPE and the hon. member's question about PPE, Mr. Speaker, I remind the hon. member that AHS, when they're purchasing the equipment for our front-line workers and for those throughout the province, is buying equipment that is meeting all of the standards that are required. I do take the feedback, though, from our front-line workers and made sure that AHS is understanding and working with our front-line workers. As we've seen global shortages of our PPE, we've seen some masks that folks are used to having different than what they're used to seeing – for example, not an aluminum clip that is being used but a plastic one – and made sure that those concerns are understood by AHS so they can work with those front-line workers.

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

Mr. Shepherd: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would say that it's somewhat disrespectful to those workers, when they are indeed enduring actual rashes on their face, to suggest that the personal protective equipment is a matter of preference. I respect that AHS has said that they are listening to feedback. That feedback has been supplied for over a month now on some of these issues, and I would hope that they would be moving to address them.

Along those lines, this government has announced that it's going to be charging fair market value for some of this PPE, perhaps some of that same PPE that it will be providing to private users or folks that are outside of the AHS system. Now, some health care providers have noted that some of the prices that are listed on the Alberta Emergency Management Agency price list are higher than they've seen from other suppliers. Indeed, even the grocery chain T & T Supermarket is charging customers \$1 for procedural masks, that they require them to wear in-store – I note that the AEMA price list has them at \$1.30 – and I note that none of their customers are complaining to them about them having a foul smell or causing irritation and burns.

I was hoping that the minister could provide some clarity on how they are calculating what is a fair market value for each item of PPE. Are these items being sold at cost, or is there a markup? If so indeed, what is being done with the profits that the government would be making off the sales of that equipment? Will it include the problematic PPE that we have seen provided so far to some front-line health care workers?

The Speaker: The Minister of Health.

Mr. Shandro: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. AHS does have a process where they are working with our front-line workers that if there is a type of equipment that is causing a rash or some other concern, there is a process for AHS to be made aware by their employees – most of them are going to be employees – or by the physicians in the system. For that to be reported back to them and to work with ensuring that future manufacturers – we're burning through a lot of PPE throughout this province, so we're continuing to see more and more shipments continue to arrive. Again, thank you to Mr. Jitendra Prasad, JP, for the work that he's done to ensure that our procurement process in Alberta is one of the most successful on the continent.

For the fair market value questions, Mr. Speaker, this regrettably is not a decision of AHS or the Minister of Health. This is a question that I might have to direct to the Minister of Municipal Affairs as he oversees the Provincial Operations Centre. AHS is our procurement arm that we've been procuring all the PPE by, not just for AHS but for the POC as well. Then for the POC to be able to distribute, for example, to our allied health professionals, to our community physicians, as well as others who have been requesting it as we go into the relaunch, that decision was by the Provincial

Operations Centre. Regrettably, I'd have to have the question about how they determined the costs for the PPE and the amounts that they are providing deferred to the Minister of Municipal Affairs.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Peace River.

I might just mention that if either of the House leaders would like to provide a list of those who might like to ask questions, I'd be happy to receive that list. But we will alternate between the government caucus and the Official Opposition caucus until all of the questions or the time has expired.

Mr. Williams: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I want to first start by thanking the Premier and the Minister of Health and the chief medical officer, Dr. Deena Hinshaw, for their attention to places of worship and the faith communities. Within my constituency and across the province I've heard from a number of faith communities, including from the Sikh, Muslim, Jewish, and Christian communities, that were concerned that religious services were not included as essential services in the initial list. They were also concerned that in doing so, an important aspect of Albertans' lives was shut down during the pandemic when there were potentially thoughtful accommodations that could be made.

The problem seems to surround the idea that liquor stores, grocery stores, industries continue to operate as essential services, but an important aspect of life, essential to every single Albertan in some dimension, is their spirituality or their faith if they have any. That is something that can and should be included in the future perhaps. The concern: if it's just listed amongst others and treated the same, it doesn't respect the constitutional and Charter rights that Albertans have to worship. That being said, I do appreciate what the government has done in an attempt to open up further the government guidelines for places of worship. The concern that many of my constituents have now is asking: what is the next step? What is the government going to be doing in stage 2 and going forward to continue to help people of faith in Alberta practise their religion?

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health.

Mr. Shandro: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the hon. member for the questions. I think he's right. I too am thankful that, you know, Dr. Hinshaw and her staff, the MOHs throughout the province, have done quite a bit of work to be able to ensure that unlike many other jurisdictions throughout the world, our places of worship in this province stayed open.

Throughout the world we've seen places of worship completely shut down and an inability for people to go to their place of worship. I would say that I think as well there was a question about what the next steps are going to be. I think Dr. Hinshaw has met quite often, as well the Premier, with many of the faith leaders throughout our province to be able to answer their questions on what they can do to make sure that their congregations are safe. Quite frankly, the times that I've also been included in these town halls, that's actually what I got as the main bit of feedback from those faith leaders throughout the province. They were concerned how to still provide the services to their congregation while staying safe, how to continue to protect folks in their community. They had a lot of questions.

11:50

Now that we have started stage 1 of our relaunch strategy, the questions are: what are the plans to move forward? Dr. Hinshaw is taking their feedback, getting the information and the questions from those faith leaders, to be able work with them on what we can do throughout stage 1 because we're still phasing in stage 1 in

Calgary and Brooks. We've seen that a lot of our active cases, Mr. Speaker, are still in certain particular areas of the province.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Mr. Shepherd: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. A few questions, then, regarding testing, which, of course, is an essential part of our response to COVID-19 and indeed reopening the economy. To begin, Alberta spends a fair amount on testing. My question to the minister: how much has been spent on testing so far, specifically for the COVID-19 pandemic?

Secondly, what is our current cost per test?

Third, what is the government's goal for testing as we move through each phase of the relaunch, both in terms of actual tests performed per day and the overall tests per day per capacity? I ask that because on April 13 Dr. Deena Hinshaw, the chief medical officer of health, said that we hope to be able to increase our capacity to 20,000 tests per day by mid- to late-May. At present the data shows that on our most active day of testing, April 17, we tested about 4,914 Albertans, and throughout all of May we've been testing less than 4,000 Albertans per day. So my question to the minister, then, is: how close are we to achieving either her goal or yours, and are these indeed the numbers that you feel are going to be sufficient in order for us to reopen the economy?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Health.

Mr. Shandro: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm very happy to speak about testing, in particular to bring attention to, I think, an area where we have been proven world leaders.

The question first, I think, from the hon. member was how much it costs per test. To remind the hon. member, I think to date we've tested over 221,000 Albertans – actually, that's not correct. That's 221,000 tests. That would be a little over 218,000 unique Albertans because some people have been tested more than once. We understand the price per test to be \$45.

The capacity issue that the member asks, as of this week – and just to give some context and some clarity about what capacity means, first, there's an equipment capacity, and we've done quite a bit to invest in new equipment to increase our capacity from an equipment standpoint. Our supply capacity, you know, at one point during our response to the pandemic we did have global shortages of reagent. We have also purchased 3-D printers to be able to print our swabs here in Alberta, so there's a supply capacity as well, which we've increased. There's a workforce capacity as well in the lab. I guess I would characterize it as an intake capacity at our assessment centres because there are only so many folks that can come in through those assessment centres. So as of this week it would be a little over 9,100 tests that can be done in the province. By next week because of some of the other initiatives that we've done to expand our equipment and supply capacity and workforce capacity, we're going to be getting to over 16,000 tests that can be done on a given day in this province.

What we need to do is make sure that we're working with the epidemiologists and the chief medical officer of health to make sure that we're targeting having initiatives that are going to help them best inform what they are doing and how they can respond to the pandemic.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Cardston-Siksika.

Mr. Schow: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure to rise in this discussion. I'd like to start by thanking the Premier, the Minister of Health, and members of the department for being here and for the

level of transparency they have shown through this process. We are in a tremendous state in this province as a result of the leadership that we have and also because of Albertans and the measures that they've taken to be responsible, keep each other safe, to self-isolate, and, frankly, just to be smart and be healthy.

Now, as you know, Cardston-Siksika, or as I affectionately know it, God's country – if you don't believe me, you should come visit – is nestled right down by the United States border, where a number of my constituents have business dealings, including agriculture. I know that the businesses have been deemed essential like truck drivers, and they're not required to self-isolate when they return from the United States when they cross the border. Unfortunately, there are many who need to pick up supplies and even pick up cheques from clients that cannot go across the border without having to self-isolate when they come back. That 14-day period would render a lot of small businesses that don't have a lot of staff at the moment – effectively, it would make them unable to operate and cease operations. I was wondering if there is a process or an appetite to expand the scope of businesses that can cross the U.S. border and return to Canada without having to self-isolate for 14 days.

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health.

Mr. Shandro: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the hon. member for the question. That's a question I'm happy to be able to take to the chief medical officer of health and her staff for them to be able to work on that question and provide some guidance. To a great extent I think, as we take measures to see who should and shouldn't be self-isolating, we need to rely on the medical advice of those professionals to be able to help make sure that as folks are coming across the border, we're doing our best to make sure that – because we do want to make sure that we're successful in relaunch, not just in stage 1 but as we do move into stage 2 and then stage 3. We are, unfortunately, going to be living with COVID as a part of our lives for quite a long period of time. We have to make sure that we're doing our best to protect Albertans while still continuing to allow folks in the province to return as much as they can to regular courses of business and with their social lives as well.

I'm happy to be able to take that question back to the chief medical officer of health for her to be able to provide some guidance on whether there should be an expansion on who doesn't and does have to self-isolate, in particular at the land border crossing, and make sure that the expanded steps that we've taken to increase those measures at the land border crossing will, you know, not impede traffic flows. As we see the rest of the continent as well relaunched, we're going to see more and more volume going across, particularly at the Coutts border crossing. About, I think, 94 per cent of all our land border crossings, especially commercial traffic, are going to be at that one particular crossing.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-City Centre has the call. He has up to two minutes for his remarks, and there are three minutes prior to adjournment.

Mr. Shepherd: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Following up, then, on the laboratory testing, to the minister. On May 7 you announced, in fact, as you mentioned, that you were investing \$2.8 million in equipment to double our testing capacity from 7,000 to 16,000. Has that equipment been purchased? Is it in place? Is it operating? If not, when do you anticipate that it will be?

Following up on that, in March the government of Alberta committed 9 and a half million dollars to bring 250 Spartan Cubes

and 100,000 testing kits to the province, which was intended to expand our capacity by thousands per day. Since then, on May 3 those cubes were recalled after Health Canada expressed concerns about their effectiveness. To the minister: could you update us on the current status of those units? Have they been returned? If so, how much of that \$9.5 million had been paid out, and how much do we expect to see coming back? Do you have any alternate plans, then, for the purpose they were supposed to serve, that is providing more opportunities to reduce travel and increase capacity in rural and remote areas?

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health.

Mr. Shandro: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would just remind the hon. member that while we have been doing everything we can to expand our equipment, supply, and workforce capacity to increase over the last few months, that that, of course, is capacity. Testing is voluntary for most folks, so, you know, we can do our best to advertise. We did have initiatives in some of the areas where we had the greatest number of active cases like in Calgary, so we did have an initiative for a period of time where asymptomatic

Calgarians could step forward and be tested. We did see about 10,000 Calgarians step forward and be a part of that initiative. But the reason why we may not always be at our full capacity on a given day is because testing is still voluntary. We are also working with our health professionals to develop random testing to help them with their surveillance as much as a diagnosis purpose as well.

Questions about Spartan, Mr. Speaker: yes, Health Canada did start to express concerns. Spartan voluntarily recalled those devices. We're not proceeding with those devices, but we do have – since May 17, we've been increasing equipment capacity by purchasing new equipment, everything from the Simplex to the easyMag to the Biomed and the KingFisher equipment, to be able to make sure that we are, from an equipment-capacity standpoint, increasing what we can do on a given day.

The Speaker: Hon. members, I hesitate to interrupt, but for the time allotted pursuant to Standing Order 4(2.1) the Assembly will stand adjourned; however, 26 minutes remain of the initial portion of the 50 minutes for the hon. Minister of Health.

[The Assembly adjourned at 12 p.m.]

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