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The 30th Legislature
Second Session

Alberta Hansard

Tuesday afternoon, November 17, 2020

Day 66

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

1:30 p.m.

Tuesday, November 17, 2020

[The Speaker in the chair]

Prayers

The Speaker: Lord, the God of righteousness and truth, grant to our Queen and to her government, to all Members of the Legislative Assembly, and to those in positions of responsibility the guidance of Your spirit. May they never lead the province wrongly through love of power, desire to please, or unworthy ideas but, laying aside all private interests and prejudices, keep in mind their responsibility to seek to improve the condition of all. Amen.

Please be seated.

Members' Statements

COVID-19 Contact Tracing Apps

Mr. Dang: Eight out of 10 Canadian provinces use the national COVID-19 Alert app to let them know if they've been exposed to the virus. It may not be perfect, but it's been used thousands upon thousands of times to track down close contacts, easing the burden on massively overworked contact tracers. In Ontario the national app has helped with about 5 per cent of all cases, and as we enter exponential growth here in Alberta due to this government's failure to act, another 5 per cent would save lives.

But we don't have the national app here because this Premier keeps trying to sell Albertans a lemon, his ABTraceTogether app. It's been plagued by privacy concerns and technical deficits. Albertans have not downloaded it in useful numbers, and meanwhile many of those who have downloaded it deleted it after they realized how badly designed it was.

This UCP government actually announced that it would adopt the federal app in August, but, just like the rest of this government's COVID-19 response, weeks and months have gone by without any action. The UCP could not get the job done, so they drifted back to half-baked excuses about why Albertans can't have a life-saving tool that every Canadian from here to St. John's, Newfoundland already has access to.

The failure of this government to provide Albertans with a working app is now national news, with the revelation that ABTraceTogether has only worked in a grand total of 19 cases since the beginning of May – that's 19, Mr. Speaker, total – and with a budget of \$646,000, that's about \$34,000 per case. They could have used that money to hire more contact tracers. They could have used that money to save lives. Alberta is seeing 19 new cases of COVID-19 every half-hour right now. Contact tracing is overwhelmed, AHS has given up on schools altogether, and now they're asking Albertans to do their own tracing.

We need all the help we can get. It's time for this Premier to put public safety ahead of his wounded pride and admit that his tracing app is a complete failure. It's time for him to put the safety of Alberta families and businesses first and activate the federal COVID-19 app.

Extinction Rebellion

Mr. Loewen: As this House knows too well, Albertans, our jobs, and our prosperity have been under assault for some time. For more than a decade there has been a well-organized and foreign-funded campaign to land-lock our resources and shut down our largest

industry. Those who oppose the economic interests of our province have conducted this campaign in many ways: they have campaigned against pro-resource governments, they have engaged in endless obstructionist legal action, and some, the more extreme elements, have even engaged in criminal activity in their attacks on the livelihoods of Albertans. These hypocrites travel the world in jets, live in heated and air-conditioned homes, and use all sorts of products made from our natural resources.

One of the most extreme groups that we have seen is known as Extinction Rebellion. You would know them as the group that illegally blockaded a key bridge right here in the Edmonton river valley last year. In fact, they have notoriously engaged in illegal activity all over the world, endangering public transportation and obstructing the pathway of critical emergency services. Imagine if you or a loved one needed to be transported to a hospital in an emergency when these groups block a bridge. They have even tried to shut down the free press, preventing newspapers from being distributed to readers, and now they're back at it again here in Canada, setting up a railway blockade in British Columbia's Lower Mainland, along the path where the Trans Mountain pipeline is being constructed. Extremists like this attacked Canada's economy last winter with rail blockades, and now they've used the same tactic to obstruct the construction of infrastructure that is critical to Canada's economic interests.

This is something that every member of this Chamber should explicitly condemn. Unfortunately, from what we know, the NDP are actually supportive of these extremists. The Member for Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood actually said, "There is *absolutely* room for the perspectives of groups like Extinction Rebellion in our classrooms." If it wasn't clear in black and white text, I would have had a hard time believing that even the NDP would suggest to bring radical extremists into Alberta classrooms. Remember, these radicals break the law and endanger lives. They are criminals and promote criminal activities, and the NDP want them in our classrooms? You can't make this up.

If the NDP members truly support Alberta energy, as they claim, maybe they should start with a clear denunciation of Extinction Rebellion and groups like them. Sadly, that's not likely to happen.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Klein has a statement to make.

Seniors

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Recently I visited with seniors at Cambrian Manor and J.E. Harris House in my constituency. I also connected with a number of seniors as I socially distanced door-knocked through Vista Heights. We observed all the precautions, we always wore masks, we liberally disinfected, and we maintained the proper distancing. With these precautions we were able to talk to residents about issues that were important. I was able to hear stories and see people in person.

One of the residents talked about how she had escaped Hungary during the revolution and had started a life for her and her family here in Alberta. She beamed with pride when she spoke about her children and her grandchildren, about her 10 great-grandchildren. It was a difficult day to visit as new restrictions meant that their social rooms had been closed, and seniors had already been told that they could not visit each other in their units. One senior mentioned that she could no longer play cribbage with her friend. Another expressed his concern for his mental health.

This time has not been easy for Albertans, but it has been especially challenging for our seniors. That is why it is so important that we're connecting with our seniors, our loved ones, but also

those in our community. We must follow the directives and advice from Dr. Hinshaw. These directives keep our seniors safe. They keep ourselves safe, but we must not allow proper distancing and caution to turn into paranoia and isolating our seniors further.

COVID-19 is something that will not magically disappear. We've endured it for months. We will endure it for more, but we must endure it together to get through this. During our visit we talked about issues, we listened to concerns, but the important thing was that seniors felt part of the process, connected and involved.

You can help. Volunteer organizations like Calgary Seniors' Resource Society and Seniors Secret Service offer a way for people to contribute and be involved, or find ways to bless seniors on your street this winter. Shovel snow or drop off care packages. One of my constituents has even been dropping off meals for her neighbours.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Red Tape Reduction and COVID-19 Response

Mr. Nielsen: The associate minister of red tape recently published a report congratulating himself on doing a good job. This is strange since the UCP promised that this focus on red tape would create jobs, but even before the pandemic started, they lost 50,000.

The minister also introduced a red tape reduction bill, and just like other red tape bills it's an attempt to put as many pages together as possible using the scraps and miscellaneous pieces of other ministries to look impressive and hide a few controversial changes that weren't consulted on, then bind it all together in an omnibus bill to justify the existence of this fake ministry that's costing Albertans \$13 million.

I'm still making my way through Bill 48, and it seems that the UCP believe that municipalities and communities are red tape who create barriers for corporate developers. Communities that want to reserve land for schools, affordable housing, and fire departments are apparently red tape.

What else does the minister see as red tape? During the second wave of COVID-19, what are the UCP's priorities? Are 11,000 health care heroes red tape, deserving to be fired? Are doctors in local communities protecting Albertans red tape, and they should be driven away? Is directing more support to continuing care red tape, and that's why the UCP refuses to do it?

Mr. Speaker, I do agree in government making practical changes to make processes better. I just think ministers within their own departments can do that themselves.

I also believe the associate minister's celebration is not warranted right now. People are suffering. Yesterday 20 Albertans died from COVID-19. The Premier did not express any sympathy for them, but he did celebrate regulations and red tape being cut.

The UCP are making their priorities very clear, and instead of finding ways to justify the associate minister's job, they should be focusing on protecting Albertans and ensuring that they are safe as cases of COVID-19 continue to rise.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Fort McMurray-Lac La Biche.

Robert Sallows and Organ Donation

Ms Goodridge: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to take this opportunity to speak about a friend of mine, Robert Sallows, and the cause that he championed throughout his life. Now, some of you may have known Robert. He was very engaged in provincial politics, was an active member of the Progressive Conservative youth association, or the PCYA, and quickly became a beloved fixture in Alberta political circles. His knowledge of *Robert's Rules*

of Order was second to none, to the point that many joked that they were actually named after him.

1:40

You may have also known that he was a recipient of a double lung transplant at the age of 17. That transplant was an incredible gift, and Robert started working to ensure that others could receive that very same gift. Working with the many friends he made in politics and the organ donation community, Robert worked to bring awareness to the issue of organ and tissue donation. This work led directly to the passage of the private member's bill on human tissue and organ donation, brought forward to this House by former MLA Len Webber, another one of Robert's many friends.

Sadly, Robert is no longer with us, and while he was taken from us far too soon, it's important to remember that an organ donation gave him 14 more years, 14 more years of making friends, myself included, 14 more years to wear his trademark Tilley hat, 14 more years of enriching the lives of those around him, and 14 years to bring awareness to the importance of tissue and organ donation. How many of us would give anything to spend just one more day with a loved one? When you register as an organ donor, you could be giving a family years together. You are literally giving the gift of life, and my friend Robert showed that people will do some amazing things with that gift.

So in memory of Robert and to continue the work that was so very important to him, I will urge all Albertans to register today with the provincial tissue and organ donation registry, that he helped create.

Support for Small Businesses Affected by COVID-19

Member Ceci: Mr. Speaker, small businesses are vital to our economy and our communities across the province, yet this government continues to fail these businesses through their mismanagement of the pandemic and their failed economic recovery plan. On the UCP government's watch, 1 in 5 businesses in Alberta are closing or claiming bankruptcy, 45 per cent of businesses are losing money every day, and 50 per cent of businesses have seen a loss of revenue due to higher COVID-19 numbers. Calgary's small businesses are fearful that they will be wiped out due to COVID-19, but instead of doing anything about it, this government is focused on accelerating their \$4.7 billion handout to wealthy corporations. It is time that this out-of-touch government stopped believing their own propaganda and got down to the business of supporting Albertans.

The NDP caucus has been consulting with small businesses across the province, and they've told us what they need. That's why we've proposed seven measures to support small businesses during the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. One, triple the funding for the small and medium enterprise relaunch grant, allowing for increased funding and a lower qualifying threshold; two, match the federal lockdown support program up to 25 per cent to help businesses that are forced to close; three, renew the commercial eviction ban; four, reinstate the ban on utility shut-offs and authorize forgiveness on utility costs; five, reduce the premiums for small-business insurance by 50 per cent; six, provide government-backed low-interest lines of credit for those who need it; and seven, introduce a COVID risk index that gives businesses the ability to plan the relaunch strategy.

This government cannot keep kneecapping small businesses. Calgarians and Albertans are waiting for leadership, and if this government is incapable of looking forward, they should get out of the way.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Sherwood Park.

Stollery Children's Hospital

Mr. Walker: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Bob and Shirley Stollery had a dream of improving children's health care in Alberta. The Stollerys dreamed that every child, regardless of who they are or where they are from, could receive the best possible care. The Stollery children's hospital was made possible because of the generosity of the Stollery family. Edmonton is home to the second-largest children's hospital in Canada. The Stollery children's hospital sees more than 317,000 patient visits each year. The hospital is one of the busiest and most specialized children's hospitals in Canada. In fact, it is the hub of pediatric heart surgery in western Canada, performing more than 12,000 surgeries per year.

Twenty-five per cent of Alberta's population is under the age of 18. The importance of long-term planning for children's health is clear. Many children and their families continue to travel great distances from both northern and southern Alberta to get treatment at the Stollery.

The foundation also believes in equity and fairness for children. That's why it's investing in mental health, indigenous health, and transitional health in an effort to expand the Stollery's growing network of care in backyards right across Alberta. Serving our most vulnerable population is crucial, Mr. Speaker. Albertans are proud that the Stollery children's hospital is located here in Edmonton and of all of the amazing work that they do. It is an honour to highlight the amazing work that happens in our own backyard, the type of work that gives children a great chance at living a long and very healthy life.

Thank you so much, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Red Deer-South has the call.

COVID-19 Related Restrictions

Mr. Stephan: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am blessed to be the father of two adult sons and a teenage daughter, who I love. Like many parents, I am concerned about the impact health orders are having on the mental health of our children. I feel joy watching my sons become independent of their parents, to seek happiness as they individually see fit. Yet, like many parents, I see the work and effort of young adults threatened by calls for lockdowns, with devastating economic consequences. This ought not be.

Some of the loudest voices calling for lockdowns will not lose a penny of pay while those impacted may lose it all. COVID should be respected, but children are a low risk. Not a single school-aged child has died from COVID in Alberta, yet there is excessive risk aversion. A single positive COVID case in a high school should not result in 118 other students sent home to isolate just because they were in the same class, notwithstanding that physical distancing is respected, with good health and no symptoms. School sports, colleges, and universities, too, are shut down. There is too much excessive risk aversion and fear.

Our children will be blessed as there is a principled vision of hope. The WHO defines health as a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being, not merely the absence of disease or infirmity. Mr. Speaker, orders, lockdowns, and shutdowns are not healthy, imposing long-term physical, mental, and health costs, especially on our children.

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

Volunteer Initiatives in Brooks-Medicine Hat

Ms Glasgo: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I want to start by saying how blessed I am to represent Brooks-Medicine Hat. I am continually amazed at how my constituents have come together as a community during such a tough year.

As we all know, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a crippling effect on our province's economy, and local small businesses have been particularly vulnerable. Through it all I've witnessed our community's unrelenting determination to put one foot in front of the other and keep fighting. However, despite the financial hardships business owners are facing, they've been leading the charge in local philanthropy and volunteerism. Local businesses have played such an important part in fostering community spirit, and throughout the year I've heard so many inspiring stories of how they've stepped up to the plate to give back.

For example, on September 26, following a string of tragic suicides, business owner Chris Hellman partnered with the Royal Bank of Canada for a day to donate \$10 per oil change at his business, Mr. Lube, to the Medicine Hat & District Health Foundation in support of men's mental health. However, this local business owner's desire to give back didn't stop in September. Just last week Chris and his team at Mr. Lube provided 68 oil changes to veterans and current service members at absolutely no cost. Chris and his team are also taking part in an initiative with the food bank and local volunteer Tara Williams to collect menstrual products and destigmatize period poverty. As if that isn't already an impressive philanthropical resumé, Mr. Speaker, Mr. Hellman is now donating \$5 per oil change to the Santa Claus fund, and he has brewed his very own brew with local brewers Medicine Hat Brewing Company and Hell's Basement, and that supports our local Legion.

Now, Mr. Speaker, if I was going to list all of the things that this incredible man has done for our community, I would need much more time than I have, but I hope that this highlights that even though we may be facing tough times, even dark times in our province, our local community and business owners are lifting each other up. Hope isn't just on the horizon; it's already here, and it's shining brightly in Brooks-Medicine Hat.

1:50

Oral Question Period

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

COVID-19 Modelling

Ms Notley: Thank you. Yesterday the Minister of Health said that Alberta is doing well because our death rate is less than Ontario's. Yesterday we lost 20 Albertans to COVID-19 in one day, the most since this pandemic started. He reduced these Albertans to stats, but they're not. They are people with families and loved ones. This government is calling on Albertans to do everything to stop this virus, so presumably Albertans deserve to know what they're up against. Even the minister called modelling "a flashlight that can help light the way," so why is he leaving Albertans in the dark?

Mr. Shandro: Quite frankly, Mr. Speaker, we're not. As we said yesterday – and I'm happy to say it again – we've provided the information, the numbers, and the modelling to Albertans already, and we continue to provide transparency in our response to the pandemic, transparency in providing frequent updates through our public health officials like Dr. Hinshaw. We'll continue to do that because Albertans deserve to know what is happening with the pandemic and our response to it.

Ms Notley: We haven't gotten modelling since the spring. "The modelling we are undertaking is more about those kinds of planning scenarios and it's not yet complete." That's the CMO on October 5. Since then we've seen multiple leaked memos from AHS showing case projections for ICU admissions and hospital capacity. Yesterday the minister himself said that his models are "a flashlight" and that he works within the numbers. Alberta Health has modelling, AHS has modelling, and the minister has modelling. Albertans do not have up-to-date modelling. Why is that? In the middle of a pandemic why won't he tell Albertans what they're up against?

Mr. Shandro: Mr. Speaker, those numbers have not changed. We still have the elevated, probable, and low scenarios that we're going to be dealing with as we respond to the pandemic. We knew at the beginning, in the spring, that we would be entering into the first phases of any response to a new virus, that we'd be continuing with the containment phase, and we're now in the mitigation phase. We're going to continue to use those numbers going forward and continue to work with AHS to make sure that they have all the resources they need to be able to take care of Albertans throughout this pandemic.

Ms Notley: Well, Mr. Speaker, there are now more than 10,000 active cases. The threat is real. Albertans must be able to trust their leaders, but every time the Premier or the minister speak, we get different stories. On October 20 the Premier said, "We do not have updated models," yet on November 7 he said that, quote, we anticipate hospitalizations will keep growing, with as many as 293 cases within the next few weeks. Guess what? He has updated models. The Premier lectures Albertans to up their game, but he refuses to tell them the score. What is he hiding?

Mr. Shandro: Nothing, Mr. Speaker. Nothing is being hidden. The models are still the same as they were in the spring. Of course, we have different numbers for . . .

Ms Notley: That's not true.

Mr. Shandro: Edmonton-Strathcona is very upset to hear this information, Mr. Speaker, but this is the fact: we have continuing changes in the numbers for our hospitalizations. We're going to continue to work with AHS as we respond to our increases in hospitalizations. We are concerned with those increased numbers, and we're going to continue to make sure that AHS has all of the resources they need to be able to respond to the pandemic and to be able to deal with the increases in our hospitalizations.

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

Ms Notley: Albertans just want the truth, Mr. Speaker.

COVID-19 Contact Tracing Apps

Ms Notley: Now, quote, ABTraceTogether is, from our view, simply a better and more effective public health tool. End quote. That's the Premier. We now know that that statement was a barefaced falsehood. Yesterday we learned that their app has been used to trace contacts just 19 times. More than the Premier's dishonesty, this failure means more people get sick and more people's lives are at risk. Will the minister apologize for the Premier's decision to put his feud with Ottawa ahead of the health and safety of Albertans?

Mr. Shandro: Mr. Speaker, despite the best efforts of the NDP, who continue to want to make this a political issue, this is not a provincial versus federal issue. The contact tracing app in Alberta is exactly what I said, a contact tracing app. The federal app is not a contact tracing app. It's an anonymous notification app. It does not relieve pressures for our contact tracers. The app here in Alberta, ABTraceTogether, is one of the many tools that we have in the system to be able to help relieve our contact tracers. We're happy to have one of many tools, and we're going to continue to provide those tools to Albertans to be able to relieve the pressures on our contact tracers.

Ms Notley: The minister defends his broken app, claiming that it's better than Ottawa's because it's handcuffed to our also broken contact tracing system. You know, Mr. Speaker, the dysfunctional logic of the UCP brain trust over there would almost be funny if it wasn't putting lives on the line. People in other provinces get an automatic text message when they've been near someone who's tested positive; Albertans do not. It is long overdue. Will the minister adopt the federal app, the one that works, today?

Mr. Shandro: Mr. Speaker, quite frankly, I find it appalling, I find it shameful, and I find it disgusting that the NDP continue to undermine the response to the pandemic, undermining one of the many tools that we have to respond to the pandemic, undermining the credibility of our public health officials. We have listened to our public health officials, including Dr. Hinshaw, who have expressed concern with the federal app, concerns with it sending anonymous notifications and without assessment sending people to get tested. That's not what Dr. Hinshaw – I spoke last week with Minister Dix in B.C. and listened to his concerns and those of Dr. Henry. We're going to continue to make sure . . .

The Speaker: The Leader of the Opposition.

Ms Notley: What is shameful is that this minister is denying the facts: 19 cases off their app, incapable of being fixed, according to experts. Alberta's contact tracing has collapsed. We don't know the source of 85 per cent of new cases. We are asking sick Albertans to do their own tracing. We're having parents find out about cases in schools from Facebook. The Premier blames Albertans for going to work while infectious, but it's his fault they don't know they've been exposed. Mr. Speaker, is the minister so stubborn that he would rather let Albertans get sick than just admit that his app is broken?

Mr. Shandro: Mr. Speaker, that is completely untrue. Edmonton-Strathcona said something that is totally false. It is not true. She is undermining the credibility of that app. It works. It is completely false. She continues to undermine the response to the pandemic and encourage people not to use one of these tools to relieve the pressure on our contact tracers. That is what's shameful. That is what's disgusting. That is what's shameful, that she continues to do that. [interjections]

The Speaker: Order. Order. I had no problem hearing the question.

Mr. Madu: That's what they do.

The Speaker: Order. I don't need help from the Minister of Justice. I appreciate his kindness and generosity, but it's not what I need.

The hon. the Minister of Health has the call.

Mr. Shandro: Mr. Speaker, that type of behaviour from the NDP, to continue to undermine the credibility of our public health officials and Dr. Hinshaw and her advice related to the federal app, to undermine the credibility and say things that are completely

untrue, saying that it doesn't work when it does, is unfortunate. It's appalling; it's disgusting; it's shameful.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Paid Sick Leave during COVID-19 Pandemic

Ms Gray: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As much as this government likes to pretend that we are not, we are in the second wave of COVID-19. We are seeing exponential growth in cases, and there are outbreaks in a dozen hospitals. With this in mind, it sickens me that there are health care workers who've risked their lives to keep Albertans safe who've gotten sick or have had to isolate and were forced to do so on a leave without pay. To the minister. These heroes are sacrificing their well-being to care for people and save lives. Your government failed to control for the spread. Why are you now failing to at least provide paid sick leave to all health care workers, including casual workers?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Finance and President of Treasury Board is rising.

Mr. Toews: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I just want to express this government's appreciation for all those public-sector workers that are on the front lines. Alberta responded very quickly to the challenge of the pandemic. In fact, we amended regulations to enable Alberta workers to self-isolate and know that they would come back to a job. Before the federal government came to the table, we rolled out the emergency isolation program, which covered lost wages for those workers that had to self-isolate. Now the federal government has a couple of programs in place to deal with lost wages. [interjections]

The Speaker: Order. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods is the only one with the call.

Ms Gray: Mr. Speaker, that minister, the Minister of Finance, promised Albertans that they would not let people fall through the cracks, yet on July 6 Alberta Health Services cancelled the special COVID-19 paid leave for nurses. Those nurses along with other front-line health care heroes work day in and day out with COVID-19 patients. They have sacrificed greatly to treat their patients, and for many Albertans those nurses were the last source of comfort as they fought for their lives. I've heard stories about nurses sleeping in their garages, others living in entirely different homes just so they can keep their families safe. To the minister: will you direct AHS to ensure no employee suffers loss of pay or loss of sick leave?

Mr. Toews: Again, Mr. Speaker, we appreciate those front-line health care workers that are delivering to Albertans every day, as we appreciate all essential workers out there who are working in very difficult circumstances. Again, we responded very quickly to ensure that employees that had to take time off and self-isolate were able to do so and come back to a job. We also came forward with the emergency isolation payments. Since then the federal government has stepped up to the table to ensure that there is pay for those who have to self-isolate. [interjections]

2:00

The Speaker: Order. Order.

Ms Gray: Mr. Speaker, that minister's measures were inadequate when they were introduced, and they ended months ago. It's clear to everyone that the two weeks of income support provided by the federal Canadian sickness recovery benefit is not sufficient to cover Alberta workers. Our health care workers need to know that their

provincial government will stand behind them. They should not have to worry about their bills when they're required to isolate. They do not deserve to shoulder that financial burden alongside all of the other risks they are taking. To the minister. Last chance. Will you take care of our health care workers, stop the chaos, support Albertans?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Finance and President of Treasury Board.

Mr. Toews: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. The answer is yes. We have stepped up. We will continue to step up. Right now the federal government is providing support for Alberta workers who are required to self-isolate and take time off due to the pandemic. From the beginning our government has taken many actions to support families, businesses, and employees. That will continue.

Financial Reporting by Government

Mr. Bilous: Mr. Speaker, for over a year now the Finance minister has shown Albertans the true depth of his incompetence. He cost Alberta 50,000 jobs prepandemic. He singlehandedly drove Alberta to the second-weakest economy in Canada. He doubled the deficit before the pandemic hit. He broke the heritage savings trust fund law. He allowed \$1.6 billion of accounting errors to slide by and only corrected them when the Auditor General ordered him to. Can the minister explain how many more lost jobs or broken laws or billion-dollar accounting boondoggles the public should tolerate?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Finance.

Mr. Toews: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. This government inherited a fiscal mess and a broken economy from the members opposite due to four years of mismanagement. Since then we have put in place a budget. We have brought forward an economic recovery plan that will bring this province back to balance in time and ensure that we see economic recovery.

Mr. Bilous: Five credit downgrades in one year: that's a record.

Mr. Speaker, the worst Finance minister in Canada claims to be fiscally responsible, but he gave away \$4.7 billion to profitable corporations, and all that money went outside of Alberta. If this economic failure wasn't enough, Alberta's worst Finance minister then allowed \$1.6 billion worth of incompetent attempts to paint a false picture of the province's books. Can the minister explain why he claims to be fiscally responsible when his only achievement is giving away billions of dollars and then losing track of them?

Mr. Toews: Mr. Speaker, that simply isn't the case, and the way the question was put actually, really demonstrates the financial illiteracy on the other side of the House. [interjections]

The Speaker: Order. The Official Opposition will come to order, and I will hear the minister.

The hon. the Minister of Finance.

Mr. Toews: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. This province did receive a clean audit report from the Auditor General. The value an independent external auditor such as the Auditor General provides is to work through complex accounting issues, ensuring appropriate reporting and appropriate treatment. That's what took place. This is not unusual.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Bilous: A \$1.6 billion accounting error. This is not unusual? Let's let Albertans decide.

Before the pandemic the Finance minister told Calgarians that diversification was a long-term luxury. He then tabled two disastrous job-killing budgets, slashing diversification programs, and dragging Albertans backwards. Can the minister explain why, on the cusp of a pandemic, he weakened diversification, lost billions of dollars, killed economic growth, and then misplaced \$1.6 billion?

Mr. Toews: Mr. Speaker, again, in terms of the Auditor General, what has just occurred is not unusual. In fact, I can go back to 2017, when the government of the day, which just so happened to be the members opposite, after discussions on the accounting treatment with the AG, made an adjustment of almost \$2 billion to the financial statements related to the Balancing Pool. That is the reality. These adjustments are not unusual. The quantum is high due to the mismanagement of the members opposite. [interjections]

The Speaker: Order.

The hon. Member for Sherwood Park has a question.

Hydrogen Strategy

Mr. Walker: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As the MLA for Sherwood Park I was excited to learn that yesterday Alberta's Industrial Heartland hydrogen task force released an insightful report which lays out a road map for how to implement a hydrogen-as-fuel economy in the greater Edmonton region. The report also projects that Canadian hydrogen has a wholesale market of up to \$100 billion a year and reveals that blue hydrogen can be made in Alberta's Industrial Heartland for about half the wholesale price of diesel. To the Associate Minister of Natural Gas and Electricity: what is the government doing to support growth in the hydrogen sector?

Mr. Nally: Mr. Speaker, Alberta is already a global leader in hydrogen production. In fact, the Hydrogen Council tells us that by 2050 it is going to be a 2 and a half trillion dollar industry. That's why our natural gas vision and strategy speaks to an ambitious plan to advance blue hydrogen production in addition to carbon capture, utilization, and storage. We have an ambitious plan for hydrogen, and we plan to deliver.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Sherwood Park.

Mr. Walker: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the minister. Given that Alberta's government has been laser focused on opportunities to diversify our energy sector and the province's economy and given that the potential of hydrogen is good news and given that our oil and gas industry will continue to play a critical part in the development of the hydrogen resource sector, to the associate minister: what is Alberta already doing to advance the commercial use of hydrogen?

Mr. Nally: Mr. Speaker, the fact of the matter is that it is our expertise and our experience in the upstream, midstream, and downstream sectors in the oil and gas industry that best position us to advance a hydrogen economy in Alberta. Now, we've said all along that our greatest resource is not our oil and gas; it is the hard-working men and women that keep the lights on in this province. Those are the same men and women that are going to help us advance a hydrogen economy in Alberta.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Sherwood Park.

Mr. Walker: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that Alberta's government's natural gas vision and strategy lays out some clear

short- and long-term goals for the future of hydrogen, including ramping up large-scale production and development of hydrogen for commercial use by 2030 and having global exports of hydrogen and hydrogen-derived products moving by 2040, and given that hydrogen production has the ability to create thousands of jobs and generate billions of dollars in royalties, to the minister: what can we expect to see in terms of next steps to achieve these lofty goals?

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

Mr. Nally: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. If the NDP's approach to hydrogen taught us anything, it's that hope is not a strategy. That's why our plan is to consult with industry, to engage with experts, and to build an ambitious road map to build an advanced hydrogen economy right here in Alberta. Now, we've also taken the near steps of including hydrogen in the Alberta petrochemical incentive program. We are rolling out all the stops, and industry is definitely noticing.

Provincial Fiscal Policies and Financial Reporting

Mr. Bilous: Since taking office, the UCP government has failed to create jobs and piled costs onto Alberta families. They've hiked income taxes, property taxes, insurance premiums, school fees, and much more, but it was clearly not enough for this UCP government. Now the Finance minister is musing about imposing a sales tax on Albertans. Big corporations get a \$4.7 billion giveaway, and individual Albertans get a sales tax. To the minister: before you threaten a sales tax, will you at least reverse your failed corporate handout?

Mr. Toews: Well, Mr. Speaker, I want to be clear. This government has no plans to implement a sales tax in this province. There's a taxpayer protection act that would require any government to go to Albertans in the form of a referendum before a sales tax is brought in, and we absolutely support that measure.

Mr. Speaker, if you want to talk about new, unannounced taxes, well, look at the members opposite, who brought in a carbon tax, an economic destructive tax, without even consulting Albertans.

Mr. Bilous: Mr. Speaker, this government is the only government that brought in an increase to personal income taxes for every Albertan.

Given that this Finance minister can't account for \$1.6 billion, as reported by the Auditor General, and given that this minister is now heading toward breaking yet another promise by introducing a sales tax nobody wants, Minister, let me put it to you this way: do you really think you have the trust of the people? Shouldn't you stop cooking your own books before you start dumping the cost of your failures onto Alberta families?

2:10

The Speaker: I'd just remind the hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview that after question 4, which he had, preambles are not allowed.

Mr. Toews: Mr. Speaker, again for the members opposite, a clean audit report means that the Auditor General has reviewed and audited the financial statements, and they have determined that every dollar is accounted for. Again it demonstrates the financial illiteracy of the members opposite. The Auditor General has confirmed that this province has a clean audit report. Every dollar is accounted for.

Mr. Bilous: Mr. Speaker, given that a sales tax would make goods and services more expensive during an economic crisis and given

that we've already seen automobile insurance premiums jump 24 per cent, that schools fees have gone from zero to \$500 or more annually, that Albertans are being asked to pay for police, tuition, and on and on and given that it's Albertans who are ultimately footing the \$4.7 billion failure that is this government's corporate handout, to the minister: will you commit here and now that you will never bring in a PST? Yes or no?

The Speaker: Excellent work.

Mr. Toews: Mr. Speaker, this government has no plans to bring in a PST, full stop. In fact, the introduction of a PST at a time of great economic challenge would be a foolish move. But let me point out that the members opposite would have us push business taxes up by 50 per cent. I can't think of a more disastrous, job-killing policy. [interjections]

The Speaker: Order. Order. The hon. Member for Calgary-Buffalo will come to order. I see that he has an opportunity to ask a question in just a moment or two.

AISH Payment Schedule

Ms Renaud: This government hurt tens of thousands of people when they unilaterally changed AISH payment dates. People faced eviction, faced NSF fees. They were unable to afford groceries or other necessary supplies. The government called this an administrative change, but the Auditor General caught them trying to cook the books on the backs of disabled Albertans. Today UCP members in Public Accounts voted to protect the minister of social services from answering questions on the devastating decision by cancelling her appearance. What do you have to hide?

Ms Schulz: Mr. Speaker, I do want to be clear. The actual amount of benefits provided to AISH clients did not change. We did our best to work with clients and landlords to ensure they received appropriate notice to address any concerns. Also, for the record between April and October the number of AISH clients asking for emergency help with utility arrears decreased 71 per cent, and evictions were down 57 per cent. For people on income supports, emergency requests for eviction decreased 73 per cent, and utility arrears declined as well. That is why these changes were made, to increase predictability for these clients.

Ms Renaud: Given that this minister repeatedly claimed that the reason AISH dates were changed was for consistency and predictability and given that the Auditor General found that the real reason for the date change was to let the minister falsify her financials while disabled Albertans suffered and given that thanks to her friends on the UCP backbench the minister won't have to face questioning from Public Accounts over her actions – Minister, AISH recipients have questions that you simply won't answer. Their only option is to have us ask on their behalf at Public Accounts. What are you so afraid of answering?

Mr. Jason Nixon: Mr. Speaker, through you to the hon. member, could she name how many NDP ministers came to PAC or to any committee to be able to answer questions outside the budget? It was a ridiculous question. It was a ridiculous attempt by the opposition to break the traditions of this place. The Minister of Community and Social Services, just like every other member of Executive Council, is here each and every day to be able to participate in question period. That member has asked that member questions previously. She's welcome to continue to ask those members

questions, but at the end of the day they should stop playing parliamentary games because we're not buying it.

Ms Renaud: Given that it's known that this minister did zero consultation before changing AISH payment dates and given that we keep asking questions and don't get answers – we get spin – and given that the date change was simply a fudge-it budget strategy at the expense of the most vulnerable and given that this minister has been hiding from accountability about these cruel decisions – I ask daily, but you refuse to answer. All we want are answers. Why won't you let the CSS minister answer at Public Accounts? Why won't you answer without spinning?

Mr. Jason Nixon: Mr. Speaker, again, the opposition is attempting to play games with standing committees. It's unfortunate that they would do that. That member knows full well that NDP ministers did not come to answer questions at PAC. Neither did previous governments. That's not the reality of the process. In addition to that, the Official Opposition is the chair of PAC. There is a committee that makes schedules that happen there, and if they want to hear from Community and Social Services as a department, they're welcome to put that forward and make decisions as a standing committee. I know the member is upset because she feels she's not getting answers. I've been trying to get answers from that member in this Chamber for a long time. Why is she against pipelines? She doesn't answer that either.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Sherwood Park.

Automobile Insurance

Mr. Walker: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The former NDP government introduced an ill-advised rate cap on insurance premiums, causing some Albertans to pay for a full year's premium up front rather than monthly, being denied collision and comprehensive coverage, not being able to access coverage through a broker. Our current auto insurance system is neither stable nor sustainable. To the Minister of Treasury Board and Finance: what new measures are being introduced to help drivers and industry?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Finance and President of Treasury Board.

Mr. Toews: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker and to the member for the question. Unlike the previous NDP government, who were unwilling to tackle the fundamental issues that were driving up insurance costs in this province, our government is implementing meaningful changes that will see a balanced and calculated approach to deal with the issue of climbing insurance premiums. These new measures will stabilize rates for Alberta motorists, increase medical benefits for those injured in accidents, and provide greater consumer choice by enabling options like pay-per-kilometre insurance.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Sherwood Park.

Mr. Walker: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you, Minister. Given that we are seeing escalating costs that affect both drivers and the industry and given that I have heard from many constituents that they are currently facing high premiums and are looking for relief, to the minister: when can Albertans expect to see a decrease in their insurance premiums, and how much are Albertans expected to save?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Finance and President of Treasury Board.

Mr. Toews: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker and again to the member for the question. Actuarial estimates show an average saving to be \$120 per insured vehicle per year from what they would have otherwise paid; however, actual impact on rates is expected to vary depending on the driver. We anticipate the cost savings for Alberta drivers to take effect in the upcoming months.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Walker: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the minister. Given that I have heard from many constituents and Albertans that they would like more options when it comes to insurance coverage and given that Albertans are looking for more affordable options when it comes to their insurance, to the Minister of Finance: how will these measures help Alberta drivers to have more flexibility with their insurance options?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Finance.

Mr. Toews: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker and again to the member for the question. Unlike the members opposite, who advocate for nationalizing our insurance system, which will only see premiums skyrocket and create unwanted government overreach, we on this side of the House will provide Albertans with more options in choosing their insurance needs. Providing Alberta motorists with more coverage options will give Albertans more control over their own insurance premium rates, and introducing options like pay-per-kilometre and greater flexibility with usage-based insurance will provide premium relief.

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

Bill 46 Health Information Use Provisions

Ms Sweet: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Bill 46 makes sweeping changes to the Health Information Act, the law that protects the privacy of Albertans' health records. The Health minister said that he consulted with the Information and Privacy Commissioner, but within minutes the commissioner said that that statement was not true. Since then she's written a nine-page letter to the minister describing the harm Bill 46 will do to the privacy of Alberta's personal health records. Why didn't the minister consult with the Privacy Commissioner, and why did he claim that he did?

Mr. Shandro: The ministry did connect with the office of the Information and Privacy Commissioner, and we welcome the feedback of the commissioner and her office. The department will look at this feedback as the supporting regulation amendments are developed. To be very clear, protecting the privacy of Albertans' health information is and always will be our top priority in government, Mr. Speaker. These amendments would not change Alberta's obligation under law to safeguard patient health information. As I said, we're happy to get that feedback from the commissioner and to be able to continue to work with her and her office going forward.

2:20

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

Ms Sweet: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that Bill 46 will allow Albertans' health information to be sent outside of the province, where people abusing that information cannot be prosecuted or held accountable, and given that Bill 46 allows Albertans' private information in Netcare to be used for purposes other than providing health care and given that Bill 46 allows the minister himself the authority to access individual Albertans'

personal health records without their consent, why is the Minister of Health demolishing the privacy rights of Albertans?

Mr. Shandro: Mr. Speaker, that's not true. Look, this is an issue where people in Lloydminster who live on the Alberta side of the border – and the hospitals and their medical professionals may be on the other side of the border – deserve the same level of care as other people in Alberta. This is an issue that's been chronically a problem for people in Lloydminster, and we're happy to move forward so we can make sure that they get the same level of care as everyone else in this province gets.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Sweet: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that the Privacy Commissioner says that Bill 46 harms Alberta's privacy protections and called on the government to pull back the bill until her serious concerns can be addressed and given that the minister has already asked his UCP colleagues to trample on Alberta's rights with Bill 10 before being forced into an embarrassing retreat and a rebellion in his own party, will the minister withdraw Bill 46, fully address the Privacy Commissioner's concerns, and stop asking this House to strip away protections for Alberta's private personal health records?

Mr. Shandro: Mr. Speaker, none of that is true. We're not stripping away anything. Look, while a number of meetings took place where changes to the HIA were discussed with the office of the commissioner, including a regularly scheduled working group, the process seems to have not worked as well as it could have, and we're taking steps to make sure, going forward, with the commissioner and her office that we'll be addressing those concerns that she's raised. Department officials are meeting with the Privacy Commissioner next week to sort out an agreed-upon and standardized approach for consulting with her office in the future, and I will personally meet with her as well at an appropriate time to make sure we continue to get that feedback from her and her office.

Bill 48 Municipal Development Provisions

Member Ceci: The UCP have made it clear through the introduction of Bill 48 that they see communities and municipalities as red tape. Bill 48 seems to take power away from municipalities to determine their own timelines on development and subdivision appeals and the amount of reserve land municipalities can use to build schools, fire stations, parks, and playgrounds. To the Minister of Municipal Affairs: do you see building vibrant communities where people actually want to live as being red tape, and if not, why are you intent in Bill 48 on stripping municipalities of their planning powers?

Thank you.

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

Mr. Madu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. None of that is true. What is true, however, is that the Minister of Municipal Affairs works closely with the municipalities and all of the relevant stakeholders to make sure that we are better preparing, you know, to use the assets that we have for the good of our municipal partners and for our developers as well. In this time of economic crisis I think it's important that we all come together to plan well.

Member Ceci: Given that the UCP and the former minister consistently downloaded costs onto municipalities, have threatened their tax revenues through leaner assessment reductions, and have

interfered with how municipal elections work and given that now this Premier and his cabinet seem dead set on making themselves a sole authority on how municipal land is used and given that this government is making this power grab while their leader is polling as the most unpopular Premier in the country, to the former minister: what gives you the right to make these changes? Who have you consulted with at the municipal level, and can you provide the information? Why do you think they want their powers restricted?

Mr. Madu: Mr. Speaker, the proposed changes were developed through consultation with representatives from the city of Calgary, the city of Edmonton, elected officials, administrative municipal associations, the Alberta Professional Planners Institute, and the Building Industry Land Development Association. This engagement took place in the summer of 2020 and included both industry feedback and virtual facilitative sessions amongst all of the relevant partners. But the good news is that we have worked together with all of our partners, and there is need for us to plan well and together.

Member Ceci: Given that 1 in 5 Albertans are deferring their mortgages and that Moody's has cautioned Edmonton and Calgary on an oversupply of houses and given that I've not heard from those municipalities that are talked about saying that they want to cede power on the ability to determine timelines for development or the amount of land they receive, to the Associate Minister of Red Tape Reduction. Your government has already gifted corporations with \$4.7 billion in corporate handouts, and now you're turning over the design of our communities to developers. Why won't you admit that your actions have nothing to do with red tape reduction and everything to do with ensuring our families pay more and kneecapping municipalities across Alberta?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Finance and President of Treasury Board to answer.

Mr. Toews: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again, we inherited an economy that was full of bureaucratic red tape, left to us by our predecessors across the aisle. Our focus is on eliminating red tape that's holding back economic recovery. Right now what businesses need is business certainty. That's why the Associate Minister of Red Tape Reduction is bringing in a number of measures that will provide that certainty, that will allow for increased private-sector investment and job creation.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Airdrie-East has a question to ask.

COVID-19 Testing

Mrs. Pitt: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Everyone in this Chamber is aware of the chaos and the challenges presented by COVID-19. I personally experienced a COVID challenge and had to self-isolate. I was away from my husband, our two children, and my in-person job. Self-isolation caused a major disruption to my everyday life, and I know I'm not the only one. My question is: given that isolation is extremely disrupting, what is our government doing to make sure that the process of testing is fast, efficient, and accurate?

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health.

Mr. Shandro: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the member for the question. It's about testing capacity. Alberta has the best testing program in Canada, and we've been among the top from

the start of the pandemic. Testing capacity is a function of three different types of capacity: it's equipment capacity, it's supply capacity, and it's workforce capacity. For the equipment capacity, we invested millions in new machines and new equipment to be able to respond to the pandemic, to help us with that capacity issue for supply. When the rest of the world was running out of reagent, we bought enough in bulk to be able to get through the pandemic. We'll continue to buy such, and we're hiring more and more people to be able to help us with the workforce capacity.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Airdrie-East.

Mrs. Pitt: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that teachers and nurses are constantly faced with the possibility that they themselves will have to isolate, which disrupts their everyday life by preventing them from seeing their families and doing their jobs, and given that there's also a significant added cost to paying for substitute teachers and bringing in overtime nurses and further given that Albertans don't mind doing their part to protect our health care system but they do want to make sure that they're not isolating in the case of a false positive, Minister, how are we ensuring that false positives are not producing a strain on the workforce?

The Speaker: The minister.

Mr. Shandro: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. False positive results on a lab test for COVID-19 are extremely rare. To minimize the impact of potential false positives, public health takes into account the context surrounding the individual such as presence and type of symptoms and the likelihood of exposure to COVID-19, as I mentioned, in extremely rare situations that occur, thankfully, due to the hard work of our folks in the testing system.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mrs. Pitt: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Thank you, Minister. Given that my constituents have reached out to me with concerns about the COVID-19 testing and the accuracy of it and given that the accuracy of the test result is the most important and effective to track and limit COVID-19, Minister, how are we dealing with tests that have come back false positive given the strain they put on our system and the disruption that they cause to Albertans' everyday lives?

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health.

Mr. Shandro: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In the event that an error occurs, the results are then corrected, and then the root cause is investigated, and actions are taken to further mitigate the risk of another error occurring. But let me say that we've made many improvements to the testing process throughout the pandemic to ensure speed and efficacy, including increased access to a child's test results through MyHealth Alberta, text message delivery of the results, expanding sample collection sites, and increasing frequency of sample transport to the lab.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Educational Curriculum Working Groups

Ms Hoffman: Hundreds of Albertans have contributed their time and effort over many years to bring Alberta's curriculum into the 21st century. For more than a year and a half the Education minister has failed to find a problem with the work that they did, but this minister has summarily dismissed them and started an extremely clumsy, extremely rushed, and extremely unsafe process to replace them. Why is the Education minister dismissing the curriculum

working groups, that have done so much important work to help Alberta students?

The Speaker: The Minister of Education.

Member LaGrange: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, for the question. I have to say that over the last number of months I've been sharing with Albertans that as soon as we had a revised draft curriculum, we would be taking it back to the curriculum working groups, and that's exactly what we're doing. Given that many members of the curriculum working group were appointed years ago, there's a decent likelihood that for at least some of them, their circumstances have changed. I would also note that we are looking to refresh the curriculum working group, and what is occurring right now is something that the NDP government did themselves.

2:30

Ms Hoffman: Given that the government has kicked hundreds of people off those working groups and given that thousands upon thousands of Alberta teachers and students have been forced into isolation through the minister's failed school re-entry plan and given that many experienced teachers have health conditions or family members that prevent them from working in person and given that this minister is forcing in-person meetings in Edmonton for the working group, why on earth would this minister put Alberta teachers at risk further by insisting that they travel and do in-person, indoor meetings?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Education.

Member LaGrange: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Previous members are allowed to be nominated by their school authority, and unlike the groups established by the NDP, the curriculum working groups will consist of teachers, current teachers. The membership of the working groups will include indigenous and francophone representation and will be reflective of the full diversity of Alberta. We are in the process of determining how those curriculum working groups will come together to provide that valuable input that we need into further refining the curriculum.

Ms Hoffman: Given that the letters are out, Minister – clearly, they have been scaled back and downsized and moved to Edmonton – and given that the minister sprung this plan on school districts only a week ago and that the deadline to nominate teachers for the working group is today and given that the group's meetings start next week and given that school districts across Alberta are already short-staffed and struggling with the double whammy of this minister's cuts and the COVID-19 crisis in schools, isn't it true that this minister doesn't really want feedback from Alberta teachers and academics and that that's why she's rushing this risky process?

The Speaker: The minister.

Member LaGrange: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, we are reaching out to the deans of education. They will also be providing us valuable input this fall. They will look at the draft of the curriculum as well. We are also looking to consult with stakeholders. We've been very transparent that once the curriculum working group has a chance to revise and refine the curriculum when they look at it this fall, we are putting it out in the public. That is something that we have committed to, and we're looking forward to putting it out early in 2021. [interjections]

The Speaker: Order.

Calgary Cancer Centre Safety Standards

Mr. Dang: On October 28 I asked the Infrastructure minister why a critical training qualification was deleted from the fire safety specifications of the Calgary cancer centre. On November 2 he tabled a letter in this House that said that the cancer centre would meet the building code, the bare legal minimum. I've released documents that show that these fire safety standards at the Calgary cancer centre were deleted from the specs on October 26. Was the minister aware of this when he wrote the letter, and if so, why did he withhold such crucial information from this House?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Finance and President of Treasury Board.

Mr. Toews: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. This is yet another shameful NDP stunt featuring a categorically untrue and dangerous allegation. The Calgary cancer centre's general contractor, PCL Construction, is in full compliance and is following all applicable municipal and national codes and standards.

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

Mr. Dang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that they're in compliance because this government allowed the standards to be lower and given that the UL Qualified Firestop Contractor Program is available to any contractor and given that this training ensures that the people installing fire-stop materials fully understand the entire fire-stop system in walls and ceilings and have experience installing these complex systems and given that fire stop is critical to preventing the spread of smoke and flames and providing people sufficient time to escape a fire, especially in a hospital, where many people will have limited mobility, does the minister truly not understand the importance of these measures in building a world-class health care and research facility?

Mr. Toews: Again, Mr. Speaker, the member opposite's allegations are patently untrue. Alberta's government will continue to ensure safety and that all contractors follow building codes and requirements. The NDP believes that non-union work is categorically unsafe. That's their premise: unless it's union, it's unsafe. That's simply not true. We know that all Alberta workers deliver responsibly.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Dang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that this government's lowering of the standards is putting safety at risk and given that we know the UCP's attitude towards the Calgary cancer centre is that it's nothing more than a fancy box and given that the project's medical director resigned his position and left Alberta only three months after the UCP took over and given that the Infrastructure minister sent out a news release touting that the construction is on time and on budget, to the minister again: if you're willing to compromise on fire safety just to cut a ribbon before the next election, where else have corners been cut on this project?

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Finance.

Mr. Toews: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. This government is not willing to compromise on safety, but this government moves forward with common sense, unlike the members opposite. Regarding infrastructure, infrastructure has been a key part of our economic recovery plan, and that's why we made key strategic infrastructure investments right across the province, investments

that will improve our productivity, competitiveness, and replace core pieces of infrastructure.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-West has a question.

Police Funding

Mr. Ellis: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. The Calgary Police Service is known as a reliable, progressive, and integrated member of the community. Recently there was a motion brought forward by city councillors to defund the police, as per the wishes of the radical left, and reallocate those funds. Embarrassingly, the majority of city council voted in favour of this motion. Minister, what are you doing to ensure that money provided by the province is actually going to the police to protect citizens, which is the primary function of any level of government, and not a cohort of politicians that literally have no plan? [interjections]

The Speaker: Order. Order.

Mr. Madu: Mr. Speaker, it is regrettable that some within city council have decided to join with the radical left, who are calling to defund the police. But to be clear, policing within the city of Calgary is an area of shared responsibility between municipal and provincial leaders. For that reason, our government provides two grants to the city of Calgary to support the Calgary Police Service. I can confirm that none of these grants have been reduced by a penny. I trust that city council will listen to its citizens who do support the police over a small group of radical activists who do not.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-West.

Mr. Ellis: Thank you. Given that there are radical beliefs within the defund-the-police movement that don't understand that the foundation of policing was built on public service, community safety, and protection of the citizen and given that a similar belief was the main driver in the defunding decision in many U.S. cities that has now resulted in outrageous spikes in crime and given that these same cities are now asking for approval for money to help undo their horrendous mistakes, Minister, how can you assure Albertans that their safety is a top priority when their local municipalities are putting them at risk by defunding the very agency that protects them?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Justice and Solicitor General.

Mr. Madu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. You know, let me be clear. Police services must be accountable to the people they serve and protect. We need to assure new Albertans that this government listens when they express legitimate concerns about policing in their community. The government of Alberta is reviewing the complaint process for law enforcement personnel, and those reforms will be integral to building trust between police and communities they serve. Justice must be done, and it must be seen to be done.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-West.

Mr. Ellis: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that there have been memorial monuments honouring police and peacekeeping officers in Alberta defaced, which is disgraceful, and given that these disrespectful acts were committed in order to stand up for a radical defund-the-police movement, Minister, as you are responsible for policing in this province, what message do you have for our officers

when their local politicians are endorsing this extreme movement by voting to defund the police? [interjections]

The Speaker: Order. Order. There's plenty of time for heckling. When the Speaker is on his feet is certainly not one of them.

The hon. the Minister of Justice.

Mr. Madu: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Thank you to the Member for Calgary-West for his talents, advocacy, and support for members of our law enforcement. I think we must learn a lesson from the chaos that is taking place in the United States right now, where a whole city who voted, you know, to defund and, in fact, eliminate a whole police service is now looking outside for security for their citizens and their properties. Well, the government of Alberta finds it completely shameful to see this type of disrespect directed towards those who have sacrificed so much for our citizens.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Banff-Kananaskis has the call.

Wildlife Overpass Project near Canmore

Ms Rosin: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In our government's first budget we announced \$25 million for wildlife protection on provincial roads, including highway fencing and a wildlife overpass just outside Canmore. This announcement came after seven elk were tragically killed in one weekend. These mitigations are critical not only for the safety of the critters on our highways but also the many visitors and tourists who travel these roads every day. To the Minister of Transportation: what is the status of this project, and what is our government doing to ensure that both animals and humans are kept safe on Alberta roads?

2:40

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Finance and President of Treasury Board.

Mr. Toews: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. The safety of Albertans on their roads is the top priority of Alberta Transportation, and I know that it is a priority for my colleague from Banff-Kananaskis. Wildlife can pose serious risks to drivers. Approximately 58 per cent of reported collisions in rural areas in 2017 involved animals, and that's why the \$25 million we've budgeted will help us look out for every driver. It has gone towards identifying animal vehicle collision prone areas and assessing the best ways to redirect wildlife or alert drivers to problem areas.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Banff-Kananaskis.

Ms Rosin: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the minister. Well, given that I understand that this project near Canmore is still in the design phase and given that it's probably going to take significant design work considering that it's the very first overpass of its kind outside of a national park in Alberta but given that we are heading into the winter season, when the conditions on our mountain roads become significantly more dangerous than they already are, can the same minister please inform the members of this House and my constituents when we might expect completion of this important project?

The Speaker: The Minister of Finance.

Mr. Toews: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Over 22,000 vehicles use the highway 1 corridor east of Banff each day. The Alberta wildlife watch program reported that in 2017 62 per cent of collisions in Kananaskis Country involved animals. Alberta Transportation completed its detailed design of an overpass on

highway 1 just west of highway 1X. The project is included in our capital plan for construction to begin in 2021-22 and would take about a year and a half to construct.

The Speaker: The member.

Ms Rosin: Thank you again, Mr. Speaker, and thank you again to the minister. Well, given that we were lucky to have no human fatalities when five more poor elk were struck and killed in another tragic weekend just recently, it is becoming increasingly evident that we need some sort of precautionary safety measures in the meantime. Given that the three kilometres of wildlife fencing promised in this budget have proven results of lowering collisions by 96 per cent with wildlife but that the safety of our roads can't wait, some constituents of mine have suggested ideas to make our roads more safe in the meantime. I'm wondering if the same Minister of Transportation will consider high-visibility signage installation while we await the fencing's completion.

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Finance.

Mr. Toews: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I want to thank the Member for Banff-Kananaskis for voicing her constituents' concerns. In their investigations Alberta Transportation officials examined high-visibility automatic detection systems. These work by changing driver behaviour when wildlife are in the detection zone. However, if traffic volumes are too high, these systems actually create unsafe driving behaviour. Officials found that the traffic volumes on highways 1 and 1X are too high for flashing signage to work properly. Instead, we're focused on building a wildlife overpass. This will be a major step in reducing animal-vehicle collisions on highway 1.

The Speaker: Hon. members, that concludes the time allotted for question period. In 30 seconds or less we will continue with the remainder of the daily Routine.

Notices of Motions

The Speaker: The hon. the Government House Leader.

Mr. Jason Nixon: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to give oral notice of three government motions. First, Government Motion 43, to be put on the Order Paper in my name: "Be it resolved that pursuant to Standing Order 3(9) the 2020 fall sitting of the Assembly shall stand adjourned upon the Government House Leader advising the Assembly that the business for the sitting is concluded."

I also rise to give oral notice of Government Motion 44, also to be put on the Order Paper in my name:

- A Be it resolved that despite any standing order or practice of the Legislative Assembly or the 2020 sessional calendar, at any time during the Second Session of the 30th Legislature the Government House Leader may, upon providing a minimum of 24 hours' written notice to the Speaker or by notifying the Assembly no later than the time of adjournment on the preceding sitting day, advise that the public interest requires the Assembly to sit extended hours
 - (a) on Thursday beyond the normal adjournment hour, or
 - (b) on Friday, Saturday, or Sunday from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., commencing with Prayers, followed by
 - (i) the ordinary daily Routine, to consist of those items set out in Standing Order 7(1), with Oral Question Period commencing at 10:20 a.m., and for the purpose of standing orders 7(7) and (8)

the daily Routine shall be deemed complete at 11:30 a.m., and

- (ii) Orders of the Day, consisting of those items of business set out in Standing Order 8(2)

and the Speaker shall give notice that the Assembly shall meet at that time to transact its business.

B Be it further resolved that this motion

- (a) takes effect immediately upon passage, and
- (b) expires at 11:59 p.m. on Monday, February 8, 2021.

Finally, Mr. Speaker, I give oral notice of Government Motion 45, also in my name.

Be it resolved that when further consideration of Government Motion 44 is resumed, not more than one hour shall be allotted to any further consideration of the motion, at which time every question necessary for the disposal of the motion shall be put forthwith.

Tabling Returns and Reports

The Speaker: Hon. members, are there tablings?

Seeing none, I do have a tabling. Pursuant to section 63(1) of the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act, section 95(1) of the Health Information Act, and section 44(1) of the Personal Information Protection Act I have here the requisite six copies of the annual report of the office of the Information and Privacy Commissioner for the period dated April 1, 2019, through to March 31, 2020.

Hon. members, Ordres du jour.

Orders of the Day

Government Bills and Orders

Second Reading

Bill 43

Financing Alberta's Strategic Transportation Act

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Transportation has the call.

Mr. McIver: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to rise today to move second reading of Bill 43, the Financing Alberta's Strategic Transportation Act.

The FAST act creates a regulatory framework for user fees on new and expanded infrastructure projects in Alberta. Alberta's government does not currently have the authority to enact user fees on a project.

I'd like to start my remarks today by discussing the story of the ferry at Tompkins Landing near La Crête. Many members of this House will have heard of it. In fact, popular country band High Valley, who are themselves from the La Crête area, have a clip of the ferry in the music video for their song *Come on Down*, which has been watched by over 1.4 million people from around the world. The video and song celebrate small-town and country living, showcasing many parts of growing up in northwestern Alberta such as sawmills, farms, refineries, and, of course, the ferry in question. It's ironic, I think, to showcase the ferry with such affection given that many La Crêtiens think of the ferry with a certain level of animosity and even angst.

The ferry is one of six in what I call Alberta's navy and crosses the Peace River as part of highway 697, which travels from Fort Vermilion, through La Crête, across the Peace River, and connects with the Mackenzie highway about 60 kilometres south of High Level. It generally runs from May until November each year, after which it is taken out of the Peace and replaced by an ice bridge when the weather finally gets cold enough. For several weeks in the fall and the spring there's no crossing at all on highway 697 after

the ferry is out but before the river is frozen enough for vehicles to safely cross. If you look kindly at it, it seems like a decent set-up, with only two relatively short gaps each year, decent enough for approximately 300 vehicles per day to cross. When everything is running perfectly – and I do mean perfectly – getting from La Crête to Peace River or Grande Prairie south on highway 35 using the ferry can save you almost an hour and a half.

But here's the thing. The ferry isn't perfect. Actually, it's very far from perfect. The ferry doesn't run when the water is too low, the ferry doesn't run when the water is too high, the ferry doesn't run when it's broken down, the ferry doesn't run when it's out for repair, the ferry doesn't run when there's fog, the ferry doesn't run when there's too much debris in the river, and the ferry doesn't run when there's too much inclement weather, all manner of conditions that Albertans are quite familiar with.

Mr. Speaker, even when the ferry is running, the people up there tell me that there are many periods of time when even though it's running, it's not running. When the ferry is running, it can handle – wait for it – one loaded semitruck at a time and a few passenger vehicles. So if you happen to plan your time perfectly and you're a little bit lucky and the weather doesn't turn on you and you don't get behind the driver of one or two or three more trucks that just beat you to the crossing by five minutes, in which case you're stuck, then you can get by.

2:50

And how long are you stuck for? Well, Mr. Speaker, it depends. Drivers are regularly kept waiting anywhere from 20 minutes to three hours at the crossing. Many businesses avoid the crossing altogether and take highway 58 through High Level. It does add at least an hour and a half on the journey, but it's a consistent and reliable hour and a half, and when you're running a business or planning a personal trip, that consistency and that reliability actually mean something. Needless to say, the good people of La Crête are looking for something better. They have long argued for a permanent bridge over the Peace, and given this context you might say that the government ought to build a bridge.

For the benefit of the members in this Chamber, I'd like to take a moment to expand on the criteria that Alberta Transportation uses to prioritize infrastructure projects. These standards are province-wide – and for those that go and get out the Google machine or whatever they have to do to do some research, I will not say that the standards have always been applied one hundred per cent consistently in the 110-plus years that Alberta has been a province, but fairly consistently, I think, is a reasonable description – and it's not one standard for one part of Alberta, another standard for another.

First, when determining whether or not a road should be paved, the existing road should have at least 400 vehicles on it a day. That's a provincial standard. To twin a highway, the highway should have at least 10,000 to 12,000 vehicles a day. Once these thresholds are met, Transportation evaluates the project along with the criteria. The first criteria is always safety. That's always our top priority. Precious taxpayer dollars are allocated, first and foremost, to improve safety. Then weighed about evenly are economic development impact, social impact, and community considerations. Projects are shoehorned in, depending on how much funding the department is given during a fiscal year.

So the question here is: where was the bridge to replace the La Crête ferry? Well, Mr. Speaker, with approximately 300 vehicles a day and a bridge span exceeding 700 metres, costing in the neighbourhood of \$200 million, it was nowhere on the capital plan and never would be. No government – not the NDP government, not a Conservative government – had plans to replace the ferry with

a bridge at any point in the coming decades. The cost is simply too high based on the traffic count.

We took the traffic counts and the bridge costs back to the people of La Crête and informed them the government would not be building a \$200 million bridge for 300 vehicles per day any time in the near future and highly likely never. We suspected that while they may not be happy with the prospect of a new-and-improved ferry – they didn't like the idea of a new ferry to replace the old ferry – they would understand that this wasn't going to happen. They did understand, and, Mr. Speaker, what happened next surprised me.

In July of this year Mackenzie county sent me a letter. I'd like to read some portions of it into the record.

On average, the [Tompkins] Crossing offers full capacity crossing approximately forty percent (40%) of the [year]. Full capacity crossing is determined when the ice road crossing is listed at a weight capacity of 63.5 tonnes. Additionally, the Crossing is closed entirely approximately thirty percent (30%) of the year.

Clearly, the ferry is unreliable.

Another quote:

Mackenzie County strongly feels that a permanent bridge structure would be the only solution to eliminate the challenges identified and provide an all-season crossing for residents, industry and tourists. We realize that this option comes at a significant price tag. Mackenzie County is requesting that the Province consider exploring a collaborative solution to help offset these costs by way of a toll bridge.

Let me read that sentence again, Mr. Speaker, because I think that's really important, and it's right out of the letter from Mackenzie county to the government.

We realize this option comes at a significant price tag. Mackenzie County is requesting that the Province consider exploring a collaborative solution to help offset these costs by way of a toll bridge. . . .

Our region is very reliant on our agricultural and trucking industry and we have received strong support from our industry leaders in exploring a toll bridge solution.

So, Mr. Speaker, after receiving the letter from Mackenzie county, I received another letter from the La Crête & Area Chamber of Commerce. They reiterated similar concerns about the reliability of the ferry and the importance of a permanent solution by way of a bridge. The chamber also noted that they

support a collaborative approach by way of toll being applied to fund the bridge. We are more than confident this will be a significant win for industry, residents, and the Province.

At first – I'll be candid – I had my doubts about how sure the chamber and the county were, so the department did some calculations and determined that a commercial toll would have to be in the neighbourhood of \$150 per crossing for a large commercial vehicle, with a payback of 30 or more years, and for personal vehicles a fee in the range of \$10 to \$20. But the county asked us to engage, and we accepted that request. In August of this year I went up with some colleagues of mine to La Crête again to speak with local stakeholders and businesses. I was expecting strong opposition to a user fee in the range of \$150. Again, Mr. Speaker, they surprised me. The response we heard was straightforward. "When can you start? When will you build it? When can we pay the toll? When can we use the bridge?" Those were the questions I got asked. Nobody asked: why? They told me why. The community was unfazed. We heard overwhelming support for the bridge and financing it with a toll.

Now, Mr. Speaker, I'm sure there are people up there that would disagree with it, but I have to tell you that the vast majority certainly spoke out strongly in favour. As the community explained to us, the

logic is simple. Most drivers avoid the ferry as it stands because it's unreliable, and they just take highway 58 through High Level, adding an extra hour and a half. Heavy trucks, you know, can cost \$150 or more to operate, depending upon the size of the truck, and as long as the cost of the user fee is less than the time cost to travel through High Level, the drivers will pay it. In other words, there is a strong value proposition to support paying a toll in this case.

However, Alberta does not currently have a legislative framework to apply tolls to transportation infrastructure, so if we wanted to build the bridge with a toll, we would need new legislation, and that brings us to today and Bill 43, the FAST Act. The first question for the legislation was whether it should be narrowly project specific or an enabling framework with project-specific regulation, and there were a number of considerations. Alberta's government has been clear: we face a fiscal reckoning. We campaigned on finding creative ways to build new infrastructure projects that wouldn't otherwise get built or build new projects faster. Using financed construction strengthens economic growth and competitiveness at a time when Albertans need it the most, especially the jobs that come with that economic development. This means faster commutes and less congestion while unleashing economic potential through speeding up commerce.

Most of the provinces, states, and countries have a long, successful history of financing major construction using user fees. As we looked across Canada to see what other provinces did, the result is fairly evenly split. Ontario and the Northwest Territories, for example, have project-specific legislation for their toll projects while British Columbia and Quebec have broad enabling legislation and a framework and project-specific regulation. We are open to building projects that wouldn't otherwise get built or building new projects faster through user fees. As well, in Alberta we have a mandate to reduce red tape. Requiring each new project to be introduced via legislation would be a substantial amount of unnecessary red tape and time in this House. Lastly, if other municipalities came to the province and asked for a creative way to build new infrastructure projects that wouldn't otherwise get built or to build new projects faster, we want to have the ability to say yes.

So when it came to Alberta, the answer clearly fell to enabling legislation with project-specific regulations. However, we acknowledge that user-pay is a new concept in Alberta, and Albertans might legitimately be hesitant about user-pay projects. To provide certainty to those Albertans with doubts, we took steps to enshrine very clear principles within the legislation. First, user fees can only finance new or expanded transportation infrastructure. The act explicitly forbids user fees on existing lanes or bridges.

3:00

Second, Albertans must be engaged before a project can be built using user fees. There can be no toll surprises.

Third, Albertans who do not wish to pay the user fees will still have toll-free alternatives. In other words, if you do not wish to pay a toll in Alberta, you can live your whole life without paying a toll, period. Revenue collected can only be used to cover the cost of the user-fee project. It can't go into general revenue. Right in the legislation, Mr. Speaker.

Lastly, once the capital cost of the project is paid off, the fee must stop.

[Mr. Milliken in the chair]

Additionally, the legislation also gives the Minister of Transportation the ability to create exemptions to the fee, such as for snowplows, fire trucks, and ambulances, as well as the ability to

suspend the collection of a toll during an emergency, like people running away from a wildfire or a flood. That would just make sense. Each project must be enabled through a regulation passed by cabinet, including but not limited to the toll amount; different fees for different vehicle types, if that's decided upon – for example, commercial vehicles versus personal vehicles – the manner to pay the fee; and so on. All on the record, all public, no surprises, every time. The legislation balances the need for Alberta to find creative ways to finance strategic transportation infrastructure while ensuring there are rigorous checks and balances on what projects can be built using a user fee.

Since we announced the consultation in northern Alberta in August, the opposition has sought to spread a great deal of information, unfortunately almost all of it incorrect, so I'll take a moment here to correct the record, Mr. Speaker. The Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie lambasted the government, arguing that we're threatening municipalities to withhold critical and vital infrastructure unless they pay a toll. That member indicated that Albertans, that overwhelmingly elected this government, realized the error of their ways, and if he were back in government, he would rain down infrastructure projects like there's no tomorrow. The problem with that is that the NDP were in government for four years. They have a public record to defend. And that's not the way they operated.

So if, as the member argues, the government should simply fund the La Crête bridge, as he suggests the benevolent NDP government would, then why did it not appear on any capital plan published during the NDP tenure? Sure, the NDP promised over \$12 billion on projects on the eve of the last election, but Albertans weren't fooled. They didn't believe them because, like most NDP promises, it was all hat and no cattle. No money was budgeted for these promises. Despite the NDP's unfunded, unlimited capital wish list, the bridge was nowhere to be found on it.

The bridge isn't a secret. The community's hatred of the ferry is well known and long established. If the member bothered to spend some time outside his Edmonton bubble or pick up the phone and call the county reeve or councillors, he'd be well aware that the community wants a bridge. Yet Budget 2018, the last budget delivered by the worst Finance minister in Alberta history, contains no reference to the highway 697 bridge on the funded capital project list or even on the unfunded \$12 billion we'll-give-you-anything-you-want-so-you-vote-for-us-next-week list. Yet today the Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie suggests that the NDP would do it better. No one should believe them. Very few will.

"Better" is a strong word. They'd do it differently all right. They'd ignore the community, because that's what the NDP did for four years. They think they always know best. They'd take the letter from Mackenzie county and La Crête chamber of commerce that says, "Please take a look at building a toll bridge," that had the unanimous support of council and had "received strong support from our industry leaders in exploring a toll bridge solution" and throw it away because the NDP think they always know best. And what would the people of La Crête get? Not a bridge. The proof is four years of funded and unfunded capital plans that the NDP government published that contain no reference to a bridge replacing the ferry.

The Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie essentially concedes this point in media interviews he's done on the FAST Act. On the radio earlier this month the member was asked what the NDP would do. Amidst a stumbling answer the member said that the bridge would have to go through a normal capital planning process. You don't have to be an expert to get the subtext there. Under the NDP there would be no bridge, just as there was not for four years.

Mr. Speaker, I'm proud to stand here today and defend this legislation that responds to the community's needs, that recognizes that local Albertans know what their drivers and their businesses need and their citizens want, and enables us to build infrastructure that wouldn't otherwise get built.

The next point the opposition has tried to argue: that Alberta's government is forcing this option on the community, that we are — they actually used the word “extorting,” Mr. Speaker, the people of Mackenzie county and La Crête to get our way. Here again I'll let the record speak for itself. The letter sent to me by Mackenzie county council and the area chamber are public for all to see.

The Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie has even quoted the letters in his attacks in previous weeks, and I'll quote them again here. “Mackenzie County is requesting that the Province consider exploring a collaborative solution to help offset these costs by way of a toll bridge.” The county asked the province to explore a toll. They characterized it as “a collaborative solution.” That is hardly language indicating a relationship where the province, being Goliath, is squeezing David, the county, for every penny. Quite the opposite, Mr. Speaker. They asked; we said yes.

Maybe industry feels otherwise. Fortunately for us, there's a record of that perspective as well. “Our region is very reliant on our agricultural and trucking industry and we have received strong support from our industry leaders in exploring a toll bridge solution.” And: “We are more than confident this will be a significant win for industry, residents, and the Province.” That's pretty clear language, Mr. Speaker, unlike what comes across from the other side of the aisle.

The opposition is plainly trying to mislead Albertans about the wishes of the county. They have a terrible record in the NDP caucus in rural Alberta and would rather perpetuate it than work collaboratively with our government to find solutions for needed infrastructure.

Next, the opposition claims that a Conservative government will never build public infrastructure again. Wow. The counter to that is quite simple. In June Alberta's government launched our recovery plan, which includes \$10 billion in infrastructure spending, the largest infrastructure build in Alberta's history. We're building more infrastructure than the previous government did. The FAST Act does not replace government funded infrastructure, Mr. Speaker; it adds to it.

Next, the opposition claims that our government lied about tolls during the 2019 election. Well, Mr. Speaker, the record indicates who's lying, and it's not on this side of the House.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, hon. minister.

Are there any members looking to join debate on Bill 43? [some applause] Order. I haven't even recognized anybody yet, and we're already clapping.

Mr. Eggen: We know who it is. We're clapping for you.

The Acting Speaker: I am going to see the hon. Member for Edmonton-South. Go ahead and clap.

Mr. Dang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I can see my colleagues are quite excited to talk about Bill 43 and the toll roads the UCP is intending to bring across this province.

Mr. Speaker, it is absolutely shocking what the Minister of Transportation just said in this place. It's absolutely shocking that the Minister of Transportation would even have the audacity to introduce this piece of legislation in Alberta because the UCP government is breaking a core election promise they made to Albertans. During the campaign in 2019 the Premier said that the NDP was fearmongering, I quote, when we claimed that he wanted

to bring in tolls. Now we have proof right here in this legislation, Bill 43, that that is this government's real agenda. They are bringing forward legislation that allows them to toll almost any new road in Alberta, every new lane, every new bridge, every new alleyway, even private driveways. This government absolutely broke their promise to Albertans. After giving \$4.7 billion away to wealthy and profitable foreign corporations, this government is asking regular, everyday Albertans to pay more simply for the privilege of driving, simply for the privilege of going to the grocery store, simply for the privilege of dropping their kids off at school.

Mr. Speaker, we have seen this government take their first action on tolls, and we know it's not pretty, but, Mr. Speaker, when the government stands in this place and they talk about how the opposition is fearmongering and that what the opposition is saying is not true, the government perhaps needs to spend some time actually reading their own legislation. Perhaps the Minister of Transportation did not get a good enough briefing on his own legislation. Perhaps the Minister of Transportation does not actually understand his own legislation.

I will remind the minister that he is also responsible for a piece of legislation called the Traffic Safety Act, and in the Traffic Safety Act, Mr. Speaker, the definition of highways is actually very clearly defined. For the benefit of everyone in this place, I'll read that out for this House. I'm quoting from the Traffic Safety Act here.

“Highway” means any thoroughfare, street, road, trail, avenue, parkway, driveway, viaduct, lane, alley, square, bridge, causeway, trestleway or other place or any part of any of them, whether publicly or privately owned, that the public is ordinarily entitled or permitted to use for the passage or parking of vehicles and includes

- (i) a sidewalk, including a boulevard adjacent to the sidewalk.

And so on.

3:10

Mr. Speaker, it's very clear here that in Bill 43, if we look at what Bill 43 enables this government to do — and when we look at the actual sections of this bill such as section 2, we can see that the government may, by order in council through the Lieutenant Governor in Council, designate

- (a) proposed new highway infrastructure, new highway infrastructure or a portion thereof, or
- (b) proposed expanded highway infrastructure, expanded highway infrastructure or a portion thereof.

What does that mean? It means that basically any roadway that this government or any future government wants to build here in Alberta could be designated a toll road, and as we know from the Traffic Safety Act, that this minister is also responsible for, “highway” means basically anywhere you could expect to have a car, anywhere you could expect to have a motor vehicle or indeed even some places you wouldn't expect a motor vehicle, such as a sidewalk.

Mr. Speaker, this minister is enabling through his legislation one of the most money-grabbing and aggressive legislations we have ever seen in terms of attacking Albertans' wallets. He's actually enabling this government to toll anything from a simple sidewalk in a neighbourhood. That's what we're talking about here.

I have some questions I'd like to ask the minister. I mean, the minister has the right and the opportunity in this place to respond to questions from the opposition. Perhaps first off I'd like to ask the minister and this government and the Premier: why did they break their election promise to Albertans? Why did they bring in toll road legislation when they clearly said in the campaign that they would not introduce any toll road legislation? Why were tolls not mentioned anywhere in the UCP platform? I think it was mentioned

– I’ve counted – exactly zero times in the platform. While the government has said that this is the largest mandate and the most robust mandate that has ever come forward, they couldn’t even manage to include this substantive piece of legislation in their mandate, Mr. Speaker.

I guess the question really is to the Minister of Transportation, to the Premier: why was there no consultation with Albertans on this significant shift in government policy? Why was there no consultation with this significant money grab against the people of Alberta? Why does this government continue to mislead Albertans when they’re bringing in legislation that allows them to toll any road across this entire province that is constructed?

Mr. Speaker, I think that Albertans are also concerned and confused about this legislation. In section 2, again, of this legislation it says that a proposed new highway infrastructure or sections thereof or portions thereof can be tolled, and this government can go in and take money away from Albertans who use these roads. I think Albertans are concerned about what that actually means.

“New” is not defined in the legislation. It’s not defined in any of the pieces of legislation I reviewed, Mr. Speaker. Does that mean that roads that are currently under construction could be tolled? Does that mean that roads such as the one that our government announced, the southwest Anthony Henday expansion, a road that’s used by over 100,000 people per day, could now suddenly be tolled without any consultation – well, with minimal consultation, as is in this legislation – with minimal consultation, without any actual thresholds? And suddenly, well, we’re going to see families paying more. Those are the types of questions Albertans are actually asking right now.

Mr. Speaker, it’s unbelievable that this minister would come forward and introduce legislation like this because this minister claims that this is such a good thing; it’s going to enable these new infrastructures to be built in an efficient way, yet the government was unable to even see that the simple definitions they’re using – the definition of highway is so broadly reaching and so widely spanning that it’s simply insulting to Albertans to say that any single roadway, any single alleyway, any single sidewalk could be tolled. That is what this government is actually introducing.

What was the government thinking, Mr. Speaker? What were the legislative drafters thinking when they were directed by this minister to do that? What was this government thinking when they decided they wanted to bring every single roadway that exists in this province, anywhere I could park a car in this province, under legislation, including in my own private driveway? The government could, with this legislation, toll my private driveway. That’s simply absurd. It simply does not make any sense, yet that is what this government is enabling. Yet that is what this government is actually bringing forward in Bill 43. Yet that is what this government is actually suggesting could happen with Bill 43.

Now, Mr. Speaker, the government says that tolls will only happen after community consultation. The limit of consultation is not defined in the legislation. The amount of consultation is not defined in the legislation. The thresholds are not defined, and indeed whether the consultation has to even be accepted is not defined. Indeed, given this legislation all the government has to do is put out a Google form survey, receive a hundred responses, completely ignore them, not even open the results, and they could say, reasonably, that they consulted. So when the government is asking for permission to toll private driveways, is asking for permission to toll the Deerfoot, when it’s asking for permission to toll the southwest Anthony Henday, when it’s asking for permission to toll sidewalks in front of schools, when it’s asking for permission to do any of these things, the opposition and the public and

Albertans must put a critical eye and must ask the government: why? Why did the government make this legislation so broad-reaching, why did this government make this legislation so wide, and why did they not narrow the scope?

If the government had intended to do this for a specific cause – and, indeed, we’ve seen in the first case study here the Tompkins Crossing toll bridge being put in as a potential toll road, Mr. Speaker. We see that this government does have intention and does have plans for how they want to implement these tolls, does have plans for how they want to take money away from Albertans while they’re driving on the roads. We know that that’s happening. We can see it happening. The minister spoke about it in his remarks. Then why did the government not take any measures to narrow that scope? Why did the government not even take a single second to consider that the narrowing of that scope is important?

Mr. Speaker, it is particularly concerning because we’ve heard this minister even hint at future projects that are going to be tolled. In the media there was talk in Calgary about expanding possible roads in Calgary such as the Deerfoot through the use of tolls. He’s asking Calgarians to pay more after giving \$4.7 billion away to already-wealthy and already-profitable corporations, after causing over 50,000 job losses across this province even before the pandemic began and then hundreds of thousands of job losses during this pandemic. This minister is actually suggesting in the public that Calgarians should pay more just to use the roads. That’s what this minister is actually saying, that his neighbours should pay more. That’s what this minister is saying here with this legislation.

Bill 43 is something that simply cannot stand as it’s introduced. This government has not given any thought, it seems, to the importance of making sure we have robust legislation, the importance of making sure we have legislation that does not give the government too much power, and, Mr. Speaker, that’s a pattern for this government, right? It’s a recurring theme. This government likes to do power grabs. It likes to do money grabs. It likes to do these bills that allow them to do whatever they want. Albertans are not happy with that. We know that. We know that Albertans don’t want to pay additional tolls to use their roads. We know that Albertans don’t want this government to keep doing power grabs, and we know that in the past, when this government has done power grabs – we know that just a few months ago, for example, during this health emergency this government was forced to revise their power grab and come back to this place and introduce amending legislation because they went too far. So we know that this government has a bad track record, right? We know this government has a terrible track record in regard to power grabs. We know this government has a terrible track record in regard to finances. Now we see the culmination of the two. We see a power grab that allows them to take more money from families. That’s the summation of Bill 43, right?

Mr. Speaker, the shocking thing, really, is that after this government has already lost \$1.6 billion – they miscounted \$1.6 billion of Albertans’ money – they gave \$4.7 billion away and then lost another \$1.6 billion, and after they’ve done all these things, they’ve said: well, trust us; we’re going to go in and actually take money out of every pocketbook as you drive down the Deerfoot, as you drive down the southwest Anthony Henday, as you drive across the highways. That’s what this government is actually suggesting.

Mr. Speaker, government members appear to be scoffing, but again I remind them that that’s actually what this minister said in the media, that expansion of the Deerfoot, for example, would result in additional tolls. That was the summation of what the minister said in the media. So it’s shocking, because we see time and time again this government say that they’re fighting for families, this government say that they’re trying to make life more affordable,

this government say that they're focused on jobs, economy, and pipelines, but instead what we see is this government introduce legislation that takes money away from families. We see this government introduce legislation such as the \$4.7 billion corporate giveaway, that cost Alberta jobs. We see this government introduce legislation that makes life more difficult and more expensive for Alberta families. And then we see Bill 43 here, which does all of those things at once. It grabs for power, it helps your wealthy, profitable friends and donors, and then it hurts families. We see them doing all of those things at once right now.

It is absolutely shocking that this government has the audacity to continue to introduce legislation that they specifically said that they would not introduce during this campaign, the last campaign, Mr. Speaker. In their mandate the Premier specifically said that he would not introduce toll road legislation, and now we see the Financing Alberta's Strategic Transportation Act, which is toll road legislation. It's something that this government needs to own up to. They need to own up to why they did not campaign on this, why they indeed actually campaigned against this, and then still introduced it in this place. It simply is not fair to families, right? It's simply not fair to families.

3:20

For example, Mr. Speaker, we see the maximum fines of \$2,500 set in this legislation, but there's no cap on things like interest rates on the fines, tolls, and penalties, and there's no expectation. Albertans already don't trust this government. Albertans don't believe this government is prudent, and they do not believe this government is a responsible fiscal manager. We know that to be the case because the Auditor General found that this government actually lost – miscounted – \$1.6 billion through basically dirty accounting tricks in some cases, in the case of Children's Services. We know that the government continues to do these types of things. So when we see that there's a maximum fine of \$2,500 but then no cap on things like interest rates and so on, Albertans do not trust this government.

They know this government has misled Albertans in the past. They know this government has cost Albertans money in the past. They know this government is going in and making life more expensive for every single family, Mr. Speaker, by doing things like increasing the personal income taxes, in a very sneaky way, according to the Canadian Taxpayers Federation. We know this government is doing all of these types of money grabs. We know they're increasing property taxes, and then now, on top of that, they're saying that just to use the roads, the roads that are going to exist and need to exist because hundreds of thousands of people are using our roads every single day, just to use those roads, now they want them to pay more.

That's what this government is saying with this legislation. That's what this legislation brings forward, and that's why this legislation is so deeply flawed. It's deeply flawed because this minister has not taken into consideration why the scope needs to be so big. The minister has not taken into consideration why the scope of this government's power grab needs to be so big, has not taken into consideration why the money grab needs to be so substantial and why it needs to be so aggressive, Mr. Speaker.

It's very concerning because we know that again and again this government cannot be trusted. We know from the Auditor General's report that again and again this government has misplaced \$1.6 billion already. We know they've given \$4.7 billion away to wealthy and profitable corporations, and now they're telling those same corporations in many cases that they can go in and take money out of the families in Calgary, that they can go and take money out of the families of La Crête, that they can go and

take money out of the families in my riding of Edmonton-South, that they can go and take money out of the pockets of every single Albertan. That's what this legislation enables. This legislation enables, quite simply, a system that would allow the government to sell off the rights to your own driveway, to sell off the rights to the sidewalk in front of your school, to the drop-off zone in front of your school.

Mr. Speaker, the government would say that they have no intention of doing that. Well, a few comments about that. Why would any Albertan trust this government on anything they have to say? And, on top of that, why is it enabled in this legislation? If the government had no intention of allowing private driveways to be tolled, if the government had no intention of allowing private roadways to be tolled, residential roadways to be tolled, sidewalks to be tolled, why did the government enable all that in this legislation? Why did the government not take any steps to narrow the scope? Why did the government use the Traffic Safety Act definition of highway? Why is that the case?

Mr. Speaker, it's either because the minister did not understand his own bill, or it's because the minister did not care and actually intended to use that power. It has to be one of those two. We know the minister went through a substantive legislative drafting process on this. We know that this is now introduced as government policy and has been seen by the eyes of many, many government lawyers. We know that when these things go to cabinet for debate, the minister presents these as options.

Mr. Speaker, these options came back, and the government said yes. The government said: "Yes. We should make sure we have all this power. We should make sure we have the power to toll the Tim Hortons drive-through, to toll the McDonald's drive-through." That's what this government actually said. Those are the actual powers that this bill enables. The minister is laughing, but if he doesn't understand the substantial difficulty that Albertans are going to have with understanding why the bill actually enables this, then the minister needs to go back to the drawing board, right? The minister needs to withdraw this bill. The minister needs to go back and actually say: "We don't want these things in the bill. We need to redefine and not use highway in this bill. We need to actually narrow the scope of this legislation, and we need to actually have a discussion about what these tolls should be."

Again, Mr. Speaker, even that would be misleading to Albertans. I think that the government campaigned very clearly on not introducing any toll legislation but instead this massive power grab, this massive, aggressive money grab by the government now enables them to attack any road, any family, any place in this province, anywhere any family could drive a vehicle. Anywhere across this province Albertans can suddenly expect to pay more because this government did not narrow the scope and because this government did not do their due diligence and because this government did not understand the legislation they are bringing forward. That is very concerning. That's very disappointing.

It's something that this minister – he's been in this place a very long time; I think probably over a decade now, just about – should know better, right? He's been in politics much longer than he was even here. Indeed, he was on Calgary city council, and now he's asking his own constituents, that he represented when on Calgary city council, that if they expand the Deerfoot, he should expect them to pay more. That's what he's actually telling his former constituents, his current constituents, his neighbours, and his friends, Mr. Speaker, that every single Albertan should expect to pay more. That's very disappointing, it's very concerning, and I think that this government should have done better.

This government should have actually done the work, they should have done their due diligence, they should have reviewed

the legislation, they should have reviewed the Traffic Safety Act, they should have reviewed other pieces of legislation and understood the ramifications that introducing Bill 43 would have, and they should have understood what introducing this substantive legislation would do. If they did understand that, then they have to explain to Albertans, they have to explain to this House why they made those decisions because these are policy decisions, right?

Mr. Speaker, these are actual policy decisions, right? The decision to enable tolling of private driveways, the decision to enable tolling of every single highway, including the school drop-off zone, including the Tim Hortons drive-through, including the private roadways: those are policy decisions. Those are decisions that at the cabinet table every single cabinet minister has to vote on and gets presented as an actual policy. Why? That's simply the question: why would the cabinet, why would this government, why would the UCP go back on their word, that they gave during the election? The Premier said that there was no way there would be toll legislation coming in. Why is it now here, and why is it so broad-reaching? Why is it such a significant power grab?

Mr. Speaker, again, we've seen this game before. The government comes in with these massive power grabs. We saw this, and . . .

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

There is no 29(2)(a) on this.

I see the hon. Member for Drumheller-Stettler has risen.

Mr. Horner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's an honour to rise today in support of Bill 43, Financing Alberta's Strategic Transportation Act, or the FAST Act. I always like hearing the Minister of Transportation get to speak with such pride about Alberta's navy. I'm lucky to have one-third of his navy in my riding, so I try to keep my eye on it for the minister.

Mr. McIver: Soon to be 40 per cent.

Mr. Horner: That's right. That's right.

I think this is a great piece of legislation, Bill 43. It will enable Alberta's government to build new and expanded transportation infrastructure projects by collecting user fees to assist in paying for projects that otherwise would never be built. I think that's the key point. This isn't about tolling the members' driveways or McDonald's drive-throughs; this is about expanded, new, exciting infrastructure projects that people are asking for. I know that in a community that uses ferries, I've sat and waited. I know about the long drives around. I can picture the people of La Crête having to make that decision: are they going to drive around for an hour and a half, or are they going to wait, dealing with the ice bridge? This is an exciting move that's going to provide choice and make lives better. I'm optimistic that this is a good-news story, not the way it was presented by the members opposite.

Mr. Speaker, the Premier and the Minister of Finance have been quite clear: our province faces a fiscal reckoning the likes we haven't seen since the '30s. As we recover from the effects of the pandemic, the oil price war and demand collapse, and the ongoing war on Alberta oil, our government needs to find creative ways to build new infrastructure projects in a timely, affordable, and sustainable way. This new bill does just that.

If passed, Bill 43 will offer new opportunities for bridges, roads, and other exciting projects all over Alberta. Our province's budget rarely has enough room for all the infrastructure needs and desires and upgrades from across the province. I know, as someone that lives in the outskirts, that's a feeling that a lot of Albertans have. With this legislation, new projects and new expansion on existing infrastructure have the potential to be built thanks to user fees

brought in in consultation with stakeholders and the people directly affected by these new user fees.

3:30

Bill 43 also is not limiting options for Alberta's drivers. The government will be limited to collecting user fees for transportation infrastructure as long as an alternative nontoll route is available or should the community agree to support proceeding without an alternative route. To be clear, user fees are a useful tool but should not trap drivers. If a driver does not wish to pay a toll in Alberta, the government will not force them to use a toll road, period. So it wouldn't work for the member opposite's driveway unless he had an alternate driveway. Anyways, we wouldn't trap him in that way. The bill lays out the rules for putting user fees in place, explicitly preventing user fees on existing lanes and bridges.

We've heard the opposition, including their Transportation critic, say that this bill is us neglecting our responsibility as a government because we're not paying for these transportation projects with taxpayer dollars. The FAST Act is already proving those members wrong. For example, as the minister recited, the reeve of Mackenzie county in my colleague the Member for Peace River's riding sent a letter to the Minister of Transportation stressing the importance of building a toll bridge across the Peace River. He sent that letter in July, and now the bridge could potentially be built if this House passes Bill 43. In this case, Mackenzie county requested that Alberta's government explore "a collaborative solution to help offset these costs by way of a toll bridge." For the county the costs of constructing an ice bridge in the winter and operating a ferry crossing during the spring, summer, and fall justify the construction of a bridge paid for by user fees. The government outlined that with the amount of traffic, they would be comfortable paying for a new ferry. The county basically said, "No, thank you" but would be willing to pay the difference over time through user fees to build a bridge.

Counties such as Mackenzie county oftentimes cannot afford solely to pay for infrastructure projects like bridges, and the province needs to find solutions to fund infrastructure spending. Industry and residents in local municipalities can contribute in collaborative ways through user fees. The important thing to remember for people using this infrastructure is that once the cost of the new project or expansion is paid for, the fee will stop. Money collected in one region of the province will remain there, being reinvested in further projects in the future. Most other provinces, U.S. states, and countries around the world successfully have put user fees in place to finance major construction in their respective jurisdictions. Some of the notable projects that use this model are the Coquihalla highway in British Columbia, the 407 highway in the greater Toronto area, and the Confederation Bridge between P.E.I. and New Brunswick.

While Alberta's recovery plan needs not only the economic stimulus and jobs created by these projects; the strategy also relies on keeping Albertans moving. That includes the workers commuting to and from work, trucks delivering goods all over the province, and making our roads less congested and safer. Alberta has an extensive highway network connecting municipalities together, stretching nearly 64,000 lane kilometres. This network in our climate obviously requires significant investment to maintain and rehabilitate, not to mention expand as our population and our province continues to grow. In my own experience, rural highways and bridges need updating and repair, and whether it is a highway in the middle of nowhere or one running through town, the faster the project can be built and paid off, the better.

User fees have worked in other provinces, and now it is our turn to work with stakeholders, communities, and everyday Albertans to

get creative with our need for capital. It is quite evident to Albertans how vulnerable our economy can be in light of the COVID pandemic and oil price crash. At the same time we all know that governments cannot pay for everything and that especially during the financial situation we find ourselves in, new ways of paying for transportation infrastructure is one of the only ways forward.

As the Premier and Minister of Finance have indicated and all of us already know, an all-sector approach is necessary to get the economy back up and running. Whether it's the oil and gas sector, ag, forestry, trucking, technology, or construction, transportation infrastructure is key. As we modernize these industries, we will see growth in jobs, growth in demand for goods and services, and growth in travel across Alberta. We already see private-public partnerships helping to expand our economy in many sectors.

With the goals outlined by our government in our platform and since being elected, user fees are another example of a promise made becoming a promise kept. Albertans elected us with a mandate to undo the regulatory and bureaucratic overreach and burden created by the previous government. A more efficient government that gets its spending problem under control is what we were elected to do. We responded to this pandemic with the necessary resources, and that, of course, is going to cost a lot of money. This has only served to reiterate our need to find creative ways to pay for new projects, including transportation infrastructure.

Mr. Speaker, this legislation accomplishes goals set out by us from back during the campaign, and I think that it also serves as a reminder that Alberta's future does not rely on big government. User fees have worked around the world to offer our province an alternative to overspending or cutting projects. I look forward to seeing how Bill 43 will bring new projects to all parts of Alberta and urge all members of the House to join me in supporting this bill.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

Standing Order 29(2)(a) is available. The individual who caught my eye is the hon. Minister of Transportation.

Mr. McIver: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm happy to rise under 29(2)(a) and to respond to the hon. member. Let me say that I appreciate the hon. member making it clear that the Member from Edmonton-South is really off track and didn't really know what he was talking about.

Beyond that, I will say, to add to that, that the hon. Member for Edmonton-South actually in his debate made reference to section 2 of the legislation a couple of times, and he also made reference to who's read the legislation. Had he just spent six minutes reading the legislation instead of five, he would have got to section 2(6), which he didn't make reference to. Let me read that for you, Mr. Speaker, because that's kind of important, and it's relevant here.

For greater certainty, the Lieutenant Governor in Council shall not designate existing highway infrastructure that is not proposed expanded highway infrastructure, expanded highway infrastructure or a portion thereof as a toll highway.

There's three-quarters of a speech gone. Despite the fact that he thinks the louder he talks, the more true it is, most people understand that that's not the fact.

The little that's left of his speech I'll address now. The FAST Act does not replace government-funded infrastructure, Mr. Speaker; it adds to it. The opposition claims that our government said, "No toll roads," but here's the fact. The then Premier, now the Leader of the Opposition, said that we were going to toll every road in Alberta. As I just read, section 2(6) clearly means that it was the NDP that was wrong, and that's just a historical fact. Further to the record, in January 2019 ... [interjections] See, they're so upset that I'm

calling them out on this. They're just yelling at me now. [interjections] They can't help it. They're so wrong that they don't want to hear it.

In January 2019 in the *Calgary Herald* the now Premier said, "We're going to have to find more creative ways of paying for modern infrastructure in the future, including more public-private partnerships, including, as I've said, where it makes sense, user-pay." Oh, so this isn't new. This is a very clear statement. User pay was on the table. But to clarify things further, the same *Calgary Herald* article reported that a UCP spokesman said that if the party forms the government, tolls for projects "would be on the table." No equivocation, no grey area: user pay was on the table.

Naturally, the NDP as usual is claiming the exact opposite of what is true. That's what the NDP do. They say the exact opposite of what is true. The NDP believes that we would never bring in tolls, and they are the ones fearmongering. The NDP feels vindicated. The fact is that they were wrong all along. My response is driven by the fact, Mr. Speaker, that the NDP was fearmongering then, and they're fearmongering now. User pay was and is on the table. The opposition is shamefully mischaracterizing the Premier's comments because that's all they've got, fear and smear and misrepresenting what actually happened. When the Leader of the Opposition says that the Premier lied, it's actually the Leader of the Opposition that's not telling the truth, plain and simple.

I'd be happy to table copies of this and other articles ...

Mr. Sabir: Point of order.

Mr. McIver: ... quoting the Premier for the benefit of the opposition. It's abundantly clear. They know not what they're ...

The Acting Speaker: Minister of Transportation, I hesitate to interrupt you, but a point of order has been called.

The Member for Calgary-McCall.

Point of Order Allegations against a Member

Mr. Sabir: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Under 23(h), (i), and (j) I think that the Minister of Transportation is just accusing the Leader of the Opposition instead of making comments that relate to the previous member's speech under 29(2)(a). He is just on the same page where he was talking earlier and just, I guess, making accusations which are baseless, which are likely to create disorder in the House. It would be better if the minister explains what his bill is about, how it will impose new taxes and all those things so that we can understand what this bill is about.

3:40

Mr. McIver: Well, Mr. Speaker, part of 29(2)(a) is to actually make comment on the previous debate, and clearly the opposition in their debate said something. It's our duty to point out that they were wrong, that they were not telling the truth here. This is a matter of debate. This is not a point of order. In fact, they made baseless comments, and I refuted them with actual facts that can be followed up through the media. This is a matter of debate. The opposition is just embarrassed.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, hon. minister.

I'm prepared to rule on this. At this stage normally what I would say is that there would likely or there could be conceivably a point of order. However, in this specific circumstance, because of the fact that within the comments and questions from the Minister of Transportation he was making comments with regard to a portion of the debate that was provided by the Member for Edmonton-

South – I actually missed interjecting when the hon. Member for Edmonton-South used the specific term “lie.” In this case what I’m going to do is that I’m going to call it a wash. In the future, however, I’m going to reserve the right to obviously be a little bit more aggressive with regard to ensuring that people – as they debate, if they start to work towards comments that could be conceived as unparliamentary, I will interject.

At this stage, though, I will ask the Minister of Transportation to continue with his comments.

Debate Continued

Mr. McIver: May I ask how much time I have left, Mr. Speaker?

The Acting Speaker: A minute and 30.

Mr. McIver: Thank you.

The next issue is the projects the government is planning on tolling. The FAST Act is clear: only new or expanded infrastructure. The act explicitly forbids user fees on existing roads and bridges, so when the NDP claims the government is going to make parents pay to get the groceries and drive their kids to school, they’re wrong. If they’ve read the legislation, they know they’re wrong. There’s a word for that, when you say something, you’re wrong, and you know it. We’re legally unable to take an existing route and turn it into a user-fee route.

The last issue I’ll address here is my favourite. In question period earlier this month the Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie said that the FAST Act gives the government the ability “to toll sidewalks and ditches” and that if an Albertan doesn’t pay the toll, the Premier is going to send collection agencies after them. It was so funny that I put it on my Facebook page, Mr. Speaker. I can’t wait until we come out in public with the tolling on a ditch. If that’s what they think over there, they are in a different place.

The FAST Act gives the government the ability to bring forward infrastructure faster that would never get built. It’s defined in a similar manner in the highways and development act, which is the fundamental enabling act that gives the government the ability to manage roads and bridges in Alberta. We did not create a new definition of highway because we didn’t need to for a new bill. The FAST Act simply gives the government the ability to levy and enforce a fine for nonpayment. This is consistent with any other legislation that we have, including a speeding ticket.

The NDP suggesting otherwise just really shows they’re embarrassed. They don’t know what they’re talking about. They ought to read the legislation because they sure don’t know what they’re talking about yet.

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, hon. minister.

Joining debate, I see the hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora has risen. [some applause]

Ms Hoffman: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker and to my colleagues in the NDP for that rousing applause. I want to start by saying that it’s pretty rich to have somebody lecturing us about reading the legislation who is clearly referring to sections of the legislation that are in this proposed bill and saying that they’re not true. I do want to say that the sections that my colleague from Edmonton-South referred to were sections that are compliant with the definition of highway. He was very clear in reading them out. I know that the minister thinks it’s ridiculous.

I also think it’s ridiculous to create legislation that enables the government to put a toll on things like private property, on things like laneways, alleyways, squares, bridges, causeways, trestleways, trails, thoroughfares, streets, roads, avenues, parkways, driveways.

I think that that absolutely is the government overreaching its bounds. If the minister wants to correct the legislation by amending the definition to ensure that there is no room for the government to do so, I think that that would be the best way for the minister to respond rather than coming to this place and mocking the legislation that he is here bringing forward for us to approve and the definitions that flow from that legislation.

I also want to say that the Premier was very clear. He used similar language to the language that the Finance minister just used and maybe the Member for Drumheller-Stettler as well. The language was that we were fearmongering when we said that they were open to bringing in tolls. That’s what they said then. They said: fear and smear; we’re not bringing in tolls. Now they’re saying: “Well, you said that every road was going to be tolled; it’s only going to be some of the roads that are going to be tolled. Therefore, you’re being fear and smear again.”

The fact that there is this attempt to defend this current action, which is absolutely a breach of what the Premier said when he was campaigning to be the Premier, by saying, “Well, you said all and it’s only going to be some” or “It’s only going to be new” or “It’s only going to be roads that people really, really want; it’s not going to be roads that they don’t kind of want,” I think, is . . .

Mr. Eggen: Gaslighting.

Ms Hoffman: Yeah. It’s absolutely intentional gaslighting on the part of the government, and I expect more from the Minister of Transportation. I’ve had the honour of serving in this place with him for five and a half years now, and the fact that we’re seeing this from him disappoints me, and I think it probably disappoints a lot of Albertans who took him at his word that he wasn’t going to bring in tolls.

Now, in his moving of this earlier today, he did a really good job highlighting the narrative that was experienced and his lived reality around one specific project. I do want to say to the people of La Crête and area that particularly, I know, when it’s harvest time and people are trying to get to market, if the ferry isn’t available because of water levels or other issues that are happening, that is a significant burden, and having to drive that extra distance with such a heavy load, one and a half to two hours, has a significant cost. I do believe that \$150 is probably less than what the fuel cost would be for having to drive that significant detour.

If this bill was about La Crête, that’s the project that this bill would be addressing. But this bill isn’t just about one project. It isn’t just about the solution that was brought to the minister, as he says, by folks who were elected; this bill is about all of our infrastructure that applies to the definition of highway, as was referred to by my colleague for Edmonton-South. I do want to be able to take the minister at his word, but he’s already demonstrated that he is going to revisit the language that was very clear in the election, when we saw that the government was flirting with bringing in tolls and we highlighted that for the people of Alberta. I believe that the Premier said: it’s only going to be for commercial projects if we even do it; we’re not even saying that we’re going to do, but if we did, it would only be for commercial projects. I would love to have somebody correct that if that’s not true because that’s definitely the message that he conveyed at that time that resonated with me and many others who took him at his word.

Now we have the Minister of Transportation saying that this is about La Crête. Well, then make the bill about La Crête. Make the bill about this one bridge. Make the bill about this one project. Don’t create sweeping legislation. We’ve done this before. We’ve had bills that have come to this place to deal with a specific problem that had a solution that came forward from folks in the community,

and we've passed legislation that meets that one circumstance. But the minister has chosen not to do that, not to focus on this one situation where he says that they've done adequate consultation, and I do appreciate that many folks in the community have weighed in.

But I will tell you that Albertans across this province haven't weighed in on how they feel about having a toll road tied to the Deerfoot. If the minister actually wanted to consult with Albertans, which is absolutely what opens the door here, adding additional lanes to the Deerfoot and those being tolled – you know what? The Deerfoot does need extra lanes. I, like many people, have driven that road at a variety of times of day, and I know the congestion it causes, and I know that the folks who will need to rely on that long into the future did not expect this government to come forward saying that they were going to slap a bunch of new school fees, new education taxes, new personal income taxes. The number of times that the government has cut – oh, user fees. Let's talk about this one, too: user fees on parks and trails, including in the beautiful Kananaskis region.

These are things that the government was absolutely covert on about their intentions, but in this situation what's even worse than being covert is that they said that they were going to do the opposite. They said that they weren't going to toll. They said that it was all fear and smear, and now they say: "No, no, the fear and smear is that it's going to be tolling more roads. We're just going to be tolling a bunch of them but not all of them." Well, give me a break.

3:50

The fact that they give themselves the ability to tax additional lanes and that the minister is being – and I would love for the minister to set the record straight. When it comes to infrastructure projects that are already under way but aren't complete, like the ring road in Calgary or like new portions of other important infrastructure around our province, is the minister in this legislation creating a giant loophole for himself to be able to tie tolls to those roads? That's the way I read this today. He keeps saying in his communications: well, it's only for new, not existing. Well, how is "new" defined by the minister? It isn't defined in this legislation explicitly, right? Is it new as in it hasn't been opened yet? Is it new as in it hasn't been announced yet? Is it new as in construction will commence any time beginning after this bill is passed? How is the minister actually defining "new"? A lot of people are very concerned that the roads that they currently drive are going to get additional user fees tied to them or that when expansions happen at some point in the future, which are desperately needed, those will also be tied to a significant user-fee increase.

I do know that the Minister of Transportation remembers an election where health care premiums were floated to the people, and they overwhelmingly rejected those because they reject user fees on things that ordinary folks need and require. I would say that transportation is something that generally people need and require. A highway is something people generally need and require, and they do acquire them as well.

If this is about one specific bridge that one specific community and partners in that community have advocated for, then make the bill about that. The government is being very intentional in making a bill that is far more sweeping but using this one microcosm as a justification for broad, sweeping changes that actually fly in the face of everything they campaigned for. For many days they were talking about bridges and tolls and how we weren't out there professing the reality, when what we see is that not even a year and a half in or about a year and a half in the reality is, much to everyone's disappointment, moving full speed ahead on creating

massive, sweeping changes to the way transportation is funded and financed in this province.

I did spend yesterday – it's funny. Sometimes you go down these trips down memory lane. I did mention when I worked for Scotiabank in summers and was doing testing. During that time I regularly had to drive the 407, one of the most famous Canadian toll roads that we have. Absolutely, there are other alternatives, just like there would be other alternatives for the folks of La Crête, that would basically double drive time, to take the 401 or other options in the GTA. But if you want to get to and from work from the neighbouring communities, where a lot of people commute into the core of Toronto, there isn't an alternative if you don't want to spend as much time travelling as you do working during the day. A lot of people are stuck taking the 407 and getting very hefty fines levied on them if they're unable to pay their fees.

I'm going to try to ask a few questions at this point. One, I would love to have the minister talk a little bit more about the 400 vehicles-a-day estimate that he provided. I would love the breakdown between what's estimated to be commercial, which he said would probably have a user fee of \$150, and what's estimated at personal, which I think he said would be somewhere up to \$20, would be the estimate today. Of those, I think it works out to 146,000 trips per year, approximately. What portion of that is commercial, and what portion of it is personal? How is this decision to finance being impacted by those projections?

I'd also like to know a little bit about the maximum fines. As I understand it – and I would love to be corrected, or maybe there's an amendment forthcoming – the maximum fine is \$2,500. It would be a lot for somebody who is expected to pay \$20 a pop; \$2,500 in fines is significant. But for a commercial transporter, is the fine still the same? I think it is in my reading of the bill, that the maximum fine – period – is \$2,500. For a commercial transport, somebody who should be paying \$150, I think that works out to about 16 one-way trips, so it could be eight days, really, of there-and-back travel, which wouldn't be unreasonable. I would like to know how the fines were set and why or why not they haven't been differentiated for commercial or personal use. I think \$2,500 would be a huge fine for personal use, but I don't know how we've weighed that proportionality to what the minister himself is saying would be the commercial rate for using that bridge itself.

I'd also like to know why the government chose not to cap interest rates for the fines, tolls, and penalties. I know that this is something that has led to huge bills being brought forward by people who do drive the 407. The fee itself is quite high – it's based on how long you're on the road for, et cetera – but the fines and the penalties for failure to pay promptly are something that has been really difficult for a lot of folks who are really struggling. So I want to know why we chose not to cap those for Albertans and why we would create the same kind of potential liability and risk for individuals in Alberta.

This legislation requires some minimal consultation, that it does spell out, on new tolls, but government doesn't necessarily have to listen, even. Why not put any new project – I think the minister was very proud in saying how much community engagement there was – to a community referendum? If every single person is going to be subjected to the realities of the toll, why not give every single person the ability to have a say before projects are brought forward? That's something I also wanted to ask about.

Yeah. Just to clarify, again, the Member for Drumheller-Stettler said: well, it wouldn't apply to driveways because you already have a driveway. But absolutely anything that has an alternate route – and the alternate route doesn't need to be a reasonable route. For example, for the folks in La Crête it's not reasonable for most people to add a two-hour commute when they're hauling grain,

when the hours are so important. [interjection] Sorry; I didn't catch that. To add two hours to the commute when the hours during harvest are so crucial to . . . [interjection] Okay. Yeah. Happy to hear it in 29(2)(a), I guess. When the hours are so crucial to the harvest and to being able to dry your crops and get them to market, it definitely would seem that most people will probably feel that they don't have other alternatives.

Of course, a new toll is only on a new piece of infrastructure, but, again, the definition of "new" hasn't met my head-nod test yet. I hope that that changes.

Yeah. The third piece, again: community consultation. Consultation doesn't seem very onerous, and it doesn't say that if the community is opposed to it, the government isn't going to do it anyway, which is why I think a referendum would be far more respectful of democracy, especially after the government is acting in breach of what they democratically campaigned for less than two years ago.

Those are some of the main concerns that I have at this point. I know that some people will probably say that they think it's not reasonable to have one piece of legislation solve one problem, but I would say that this piece of legislation is causing a whole swath of new problems by creating a complete overturn of what has been the reality for quite some time. So I have to say that I am disappointed that the government is choosing to continue to move forward full speed ahead on this. If this is about La Crête and the bridge there, I welcome them to make this . . .

The Acting Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

Standing Order 29(2)(a) is available. I see the hon. Member of Calgary-McCall has risen.

[The Speaker in the chair]

Mr. Sabir: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to my colleague from Edmonton-Glenora for her thoughtful remarks. While she was speaking, I was also reading the sections that she referred to in her comments, in particular section 2, which clearly states that subject to the provisions

the Lieutenant Governor in Council may, by order, designate

- (a) proposed new highway infrastructure, new highway infrastructure or a portion thereof, or
- (b) proposed expanded highway infrastructure, expanded highway infrastructure or a portion thereof,

as a toll highway to which this Act applies.

And I can see the provision that "for greater certainty" existing infrastructure is excluded.

However, I remember that during the campaign in 2019 this issue came up. I was part of a press conference with members of the communities. We raised that concern, and the only answer we got was that that's just fear and smear: we're not going to do this. At some point somewhere in 107 pages, documented in some one-off event, they may have indicated that there will be tolls on new infrastructure, but the government cannot say that that was the mandate that they received from Albertans on April 16, that they can go ahead and toll the roads, new infrastructure, whatever they are building.

4:00

For instance, when we were in government, towards the end of 2018 we announced funding for the expansion of Deerfoot Trail. We do know that Deerfoot Trail needs to be expanded, with Calgary growing in all directions. There's need for that trail to be expanded at some point. From this legislation the government is clearly reserving that authority for themselves that they can make Deerfoot Trail a toll road.

Also, I think there are many things that Albertans should know before the government proceeds with that, this piece of legislation: how tolls will be calculated, which roads will be part of that. The government has put in place here in section 17 almost three pages of different regulatory powers – how they will calculate tolls, which roads they will toll, and all those kinds of things – leaving pretty much everything to be decided by the cabinet without any input from the public.

I think a question I have for my colleague the Member for Edmonton-Glenora is: has she talked to her constituents and if she thinks that there is some infrastructure that is in Edmonton, in her riding and in surrounding areas, that will be impacted by this, that can be impacted by this, and how this new tax – it's a tax. You can call it a user fee, but it's just like a tax that the public is asked to pay. How do you think it will impact people in your riding or in the broader Edmonton community?

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

Ms Hoffman: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker and to the member for the question. Definitely, one project that I was glad that we were able to leverage federal funding for while we were in government, that still is not under construction yet but is something that is forthcoming, is the Yellowhead. The Yellowhead runs on the north edge of my riding, and a number of households are personally going to be impacted by the widening of it, and that is a widening. There are going to be new interchanges put in. That is absolutely, from my reading of this legislation . . .

The Speaker: That concludes the time allotted for 29(2)(a).

The hon. Member for Fort McMurray-Lac La Biche, followed by Edmonton-Whitemud.

Ms Goodridge: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is absolutely my pleasure to rise today to speak in favour of the FAST Act. As many people in this Legislature are aware, I was born and raised in Fort McMurray. One piece of information that most people might not understand or might not be aware of is the fact that growing up, we spent just about every summer going down to visit family in the Lower Mainland, mostly in the Vancouver area. We travelled quite regularly on the Coquihalla, which was a tolled highway up until about 2008 in B.C. It was built in three separate phases, and it connected Vancouver and Edmonton in a very fast, direct route. It actually provided the shortest line connection between Edmonton and Vancouver, so it was typically the preferred option of my family because we were going all the way from Fort McMurray to Vancouver. My dad often tried to make it in a day, which was a 24-hour drive, but it would have been substantially longer than 24 hours if we took any other pass.

The first phase was actually opened in 1986, just in time for Expo. My parents used to often tell the story of how they travelled on this brand new piece of highway just in time to go and see the Expo and how magnificent the highway was. The third phase opened in October 1990, and I was a little kid at that point, so that's where my memories start coming into play. I remember just being mesmerized by that piece of highway. It's truly a spectacular piece of infrastructure.

I'm a bit of a geek when it comes to highway infrastructure. I think transportation infrastructure is absolutely fascinating, so I used to spend hours on the highway in the car with my parents grilling my dad on a variety of questions when it came specifically to the Coquihalla. It was something that just totally blew my mind. I remember at one point asking him why we didn't have highways like this in Alberta. He told me quite simply: "Well, because we don't have legislation. We can't do it." I said: "Well, that's crazy. I

want that. Like, I want to have a highway like that.” He told me just very simply and pointed to the fact that a lot of provinces in Canada had legislation in place that allowed them to have toll roads, but Alberta did not.

So very quickly upon getting elected, I brought the idea of having tolled infrastructure opportunities in Alberta to the Minister of Transportation. He and I have had multiple conversations about some of the benefits and the opportunities that we have here in Alberta of expanding our transportation network by the use of toll facilities and tolling. The technology has improved dramatically since the turnpikes and physically stopping to pay the toll, which was what the method was on the Coquihalla for a majority of it. It was pretty cool. It was 10 lanes across. I still remember sitting in the car and trying to figure out which lane would be the fastest. It was something that really stuck out in my childhood as something that was really wonderful.

One of the things that I found out as an adult is that the construction not only provided a faster, more direct, safer route, but it also served to increase economic development. It was a large part of the growth that was experienced in B.C.’s interior, notably in communities like Kamloops, Merritt, and the entire Okanagan region, specifically the community of Kelowna. This improved access to those communities allowed for a lot of economic development, allowed for a lot of trade, tourism. It really did open up that trade route. There are countless jobs that can be associated with that one single piece of infrastructure. Like I stated earlier, there are lots of provinces that have had various realms of tolled infrastructure, whether it be the 407 in Ontario, the Confederation Bridge in P.E.I. There are countless examples in Quebec, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, and even the Northwest Territories.

As part of Alberta’s recovery plan, which is a very bold, ambitious long-term strategy to build, diversify, and create tens of thousands of jobs right now in Alberta, a core part is investing in core infrastructure, namely our transportation infrastructure and roads. This bill, Bill 43, the Financing Alberta’s Strategic Transportation Act, will allow the collection of tolls in order to finance new or expanded highway infrastructure projects. I know that being an MLA for Fort McMurray-Lac La Biche, despite being quite a ways away from La Crête, I have had numerous members of Mackenzie county council and the reeve send me correspondence indicating their support and desire to have a bridge.

4:10

And I agree. The member opposite, the Member for Edmonton-Glenora, made a comment earlier about how it’s not reasonable to ask people to do a two-hour drive, and I couldn’t agree more. It is not reasonable to ask people to do an extra two hours, but under our current legislation and the fact that the ferry that services between these communities is so unreliable, we are effectively asking people to do a two-hour drive on a regular basis. I agree that we should very much put this forward so that people have the option as to whether they would prefer to take a two-hour drive and not pay a toll or not do a two-hour drive, pay a small toll, and get home faster. There are opportunities and circumstances where I’m sure many people – it’s a beautiful area. I’m not sure if you’ve ever been to the northern Peace, but the northern Peace is absolutely a spectacular part of the province. It has majestic skylines and beautiful river valleys. I know many people would probably really appreciate taking an extra two-hour scenic drive once in a while, but I know most people would probably prefer taking a more direct route.

I’ve heard from countless people that they were really not interested in the idea of having another ferry to replace their outdated ferries. Ferries really don’t work super well in Alberta’s northern climates. While we do have some that do help a variety of

our transportation – and I can think of one. I remember being really nostalgic and visiting the riding of West Yellowhead, the member’s riding, and taking the Rosevear ferry and thinking that was, like, the coolest thing in the world as a kid. You would wait for 45 minutes to take a five-minute ferry across. The ferry didn’t operate super frequently, and it often had problems of water levels, like many ferries do in Alberta. The opportunity to enable the government of Alberta to have certain pieces of infrastructure built in a more timely manner, after having extensive consultations with community, is really a great idea.

The Deh Cho Bridge, which is a bridge that has been operating since 2012 in the Northwest Territories, is something very similar. It crosses the Mackenzie River, and it actually replaced an outdated ferry. Prior to the completion people had to rely on the ferry during the summer season and the Mackenzie River ice crossing in the winter. While the system was relatively manageable, spring breakup provided a massive challenge, and I know that spring breakup provides a massive challenge currently in La Crête. It’s not just farms’ time and harvest where this ferry becomes a problem but specifically in the spring breakup. With the completion of this one-kilometre Deh Cho toll bridge, there are no longer seasonal interruptions, and the bridge ensures safer, much more reliable year-round travel. Critical and crucial infrastructure projects such as the Deh Cho Bridge are made possible through legislation like Alberta’s FAST Act, which would allow for the collection of tolls in order to finance new or expanded infrastructure pieces.

I really think that this is something that is important for us to talk about because, coming from a northern riding, I know many people in the La Crête area have advocated very strongly for this, and they are definitely very active in their lobbying for this particular project and have made it explicitly clear that replacing with a ferry was not really an option that they were interested in. I believe that it’s critical to make sure that we have this FAST Act enabled so that we can put this concept on other pieces of new or expanded infrastructure going forward. I really do applaud the Minister of Transportation for his intense work on this bill, that allows us to have legislation in place that will not only serve for this particular project for La Crête but will also potentially serve for other projects for Albertans for generations to come. I really think that it’s something that is worth supporting.

I do understand the concerns from the opposition, but honestly I don’t understand how any reality could happen where anyone would ever consider tolling a driveway. Why would a government be building your driveway to begin with? Like, that is the first question that occurred to me when that was brought forward: why would a government be building someone’s private driveway? While, yes, that is indeed a highway, it is typically not something that is of interest to a government to be building, and again it would have to have an alternate route as per the legislation. There are many guardrails that have been put in place to ensure that there’s community consultation as well as to ensure that this is responding to the needs of Albertans now and for generations to come.

With that, I would like to wrap up my remarks.

The Speaker: Hon. members, Standing Order 29(2)(a) is available if anyone has a brief question or comment for the hon. Member for Fort McMurray-Lac La Biche.

Seeing none, the hon. Member for Edmonton-Whitemud has the call.

Ms Pancholi: That was a little less than enthusiastic from my colleagues, and I would appreciate it . . . [some applause] Thank you very much. Thank you. It’s where we’re at right now, Mr. Speaker.

Thank you very much. It's a pleasure to rise and speak on second reading of Bill 43, the Financing Alberta's Strategic Transportation Act. I've listened with great interest to both the Minister of Transportation and the members on the other side as well as with great interest to my colleagues as they spoke to: what is the essence of this bill?

I want to begin by saying that – you know, I actually want to share the comments that I think have been expressed by all members, which is that we are very understanding of the situation, particularly for the people who live in La Crête and the circumstances that arose to require some creative thinking around how to create the transportation infrastructure that they require to do their work. I think across the aisle both sides of the House have been pretty agreed and unanimous, Mr. Speaker, in saying that we do hear the concerns from that community. We do understand that there are significant burdens that are placed in terms of time, costs, resources, additional transportation costs in having to accommodate the limited access to the ferry to get over the Peace River in that location and the burden that that has placed on the people in La Crête. I think we all are sharing in understanding that and appreciating the need for transportation.

We also understand that there are some cost-prohibitive considerations here, and I do believe the Minister of Transportation outlined those quite clearly. However, I come back to the concern actually raised by my colleague the Member for Edmonton-Glenora, which is that certainly if the reason for this bill was to address a very specific community need, there are ways – and while I'm new to this Legislature, relatively new, you know, we did look at some community-specific legislation around water basin transfers. We do know that it is incredibly possible – it's within the realm of the authority of this Legislative Assembly – to consider and pass legislation that meets a specific need.

I understand that the government of Alberta, and the Minister of Transportation laid it out, does not have the authority to toll or to tax without a specific legislative authority, so they couldn't do that by virtue of an individual agreement with the hamlet of La Crête and the people in that area to allow for that kind of funding arrangement. Certainly, it is entirely possible that we could consider a specific piece of legislation to meet the specific needs, which seems to be the basis of the rationale for Bill 43. It's what we hear repeatedly stated by the Minister of Transportation. He said it today, described in great detail the circumstances in the La Crête area around the need to toll in order to build this bridge. We've heard those comments as well in the media repeatedly, Mr. Speaker, as well as from the Minister of Transportation, that that is the reason why Bill 43 was brought through.

But our concern and the concern of Albertans is that that's not what Bill 43 says. Bill 43 is not specific only to meet the needs of the people of La Crête and their specific circumstances. It's much, much broader than that, and that is why we have serious concerns and why we are standing up on behalf of Albertans who have serious concerns. Bill 43 is not designed to only meet this specific circumstance. It's actually incredibly broad. It's much broader than the Minister of Transportation would like Albertans to believe. That is why we have taken the time to read the act and to look at what it specifically says, because it could and will potentially have impact on all Albertans.

There's been great discussion today about what the bill actually says and how it defines "highway." I have to say, Mr. Speaker, that if there are concerns from the government caucus about "highway" being interpreted too broadly, I remind them that it is not the NDP opposition who has defined "highway." It's actually in legislation that it defines "highway." Specifically, Bill 43 simply references a highway – this is in section 1(d) of the act. It says, "highway"

means land that is authorized to be used or surveyed for use as a public highway and includes any bridges forming part of a highway and any structure incidental to the public highway."

Then, of course, Mr. Speaker, as you know, when interpreting what "highway" means, you would have to look to the seminal legislation that describes what "highway" means, and that is the Traffic Safety Act.

4:20

Mr. Speaker, the Traffic Safety Act in section 1(1)(p) sets out – and this is a quote from the legislation – that

"highway" means any thoroughfare, street, road, trail, avenue, parkway, driveway, viaduct, lane, alley, square, bridge, causeway, trestleway or other place or any part of any of them, whether publicly or privately owned, that the public is ordinarily entitled or permitted to use for the passage or parking of vehicles and includes

- (i) a sidewalk, including a boulevard adjacent to the sidewalk,
- (ii) if a ditch lies adjacent to and parallel with the roadway, the ditch, and
- (iii) if a highway right of way is contained between fences or between a fence and one side of the roadway, all the land between the fences, or all the land between the fence and the edge of the roadway, as the case may be.

That is the definition in the Traffic Safety Act, Mr. Speaker. We didn't come up with this.

If the Member for Fort McMurray-Lac La Biche takes issue with the fact that "driveway" is included within the scope of Bill 43, it is within her authority to lobby her Minister of Transportation and say: "You know what? We should be amending the Traffic Safety Act, or, more importantly, we could exclude those specifically within Bill 43."

But Bill 43 doesn't do that, Mr. Speaker. The reason why we're concerned is because the bill that this government has brought forward, which references the Traffic Safety Act, which is already in force, clearly defines "highway" incredibly broadly. So if it is intended to be very specific to certain pieces of highway, to certain communities, it was within the scope of authority of this government to bring forward a bill that does that. They did not. Instead, they brought forward incredibly broad legislation.

It's interesting that the Minister of Transportation – and my colleague the Member for Edmonton-Glenora so eloquently described this situation – said that the NDP were fearmongering when we said that the UCP was going to toll roads. Of course, they said, "Oh, no; we wouldn't do that," but if you look and I did look at the very detailed platform that the UCP put out in the 2019 election, it does not include any reference to tolling. But we knew already, Mr. Speaker, that there was good reason to doubt the word of the UCP when they made promises.

I will go through in a moment, Mr. Speaker, all the number of other promises they've broken to Albertans since they've been elected, but specifically on tolls they did not indicate that they would toll. Okay. The UCP said that, oh, we were fearmongering, yet here we are with a piece of legislation that very specifically does allow tolls and not just for the people of La Crête for that specific bridge but a very broad definition of tolls on new and expanded highways, highways that are described to be very broad within the Traffic Safety Act. For the Minister of Transportation to stand up and say, "Well, we didn't toll all the roads; we only tolled some of them," I can't even believe that he believes that that argument would hold any water for Albertans.

I'll tell you a story, Mr. Speaker. I have two young children. My children are five and seven. I talk about them quite a bit in the

House. It's surprising how many times, when I'm in this Assembly, I have to come back to the behaviour of my children to look to the behaviour of the government caucus. It surprises me repeatedly, but I am constantly reminded of the lessons that I teach them.

My kids, like many kids, recently experienced Halloween, a slightly different Halloween because of COVID, and they came back with some buckets full of candy, right? They each have one bucket for each child of their candy. We put them together in one place on a shelf. I said to the kids: "You know, your responsibility is that I trust you. You're not to take each other's candy. You've each got your own treat bucket. It's got your name on it. Don't dip into your sibling's treat bucket because that's going to cause a whole bunch of trouble."

I was particularly worried, Mr. Speaker, about one of my children, who tends to like to dip into his sister's candy bucket now and then, so I made him promise. I said to him, "You're not to take your sister's candy." He said: "I will not take my sister's candy. I will not do that, Mama. I promise you." And I believed him. Now, if he were to now go and to take a couple of pieces of the candy and I were to say, "You promised me you weren't going to take any of the candy," and he said, "Oh, no; I'm only taking some of it; I didn't take all of it, therefore I kept my promise," in any household would that be considered honest? Would that be considered a way to get to skirt the rule that we've established or the promise that was made? Absolutely not.

Now, my son, to his credit, did not do that. He did not try to take a couple of pieces of his sister's candy and say that that's somehow keeping the promise that he wouldn't take any.

Mr. Eggen: He took it all.

Ms Pancholi: He didn't take it all. He respects the rules because in our household we talk about that. We talk about the importance of keeping your promise.

When you make a promise as a governing party or as a campaigning party to Albertans and say, "We're not going to toll roads; we're not going to do that" but then a year and a half later bring forward legislation and say, "Well, we're not tolling all of the roads; just some of them," I think Albertans have good ground, Mr. Speaker, to feel like they have been betrayed, to feel that their government has not been honest with them about what they were going to do. That is exactly what we're seeing with Bill 43. We're seeing that dishonesty.

I also want to address another comment made by the Minister of Transportation when he talked about: oh, they're not going to be tolling roads that families travel on to go and get their groceries. Let me give another example, Mr. Speaker. I live in southwest Edmonton, as many, many families in Edmonton do, and one of the common places that in our part of the city we sometimes travel to and pick up our groceries from is the Costco. It's actually not located in Edmonton; it's actually located in Nisku. In order to travel to go and get our groceries from Costco, we have to travel down the QE II.

Now, the QE II is a highway by all definitions, even, I believe, this government's definition. It's considered a highway. We know that the Minister of Transportation has already indicated that this legislation could apply to expanded highways, so new expanded lanes on the QE II could become toll roads. Now, given that the Minister of Transportation said that they're not going to be tolling roads that families travel on to go and get their groceries, I can tell you that my family and many families that live in the part of the city that we live in do travel on highways to go and get their groceries.

Now, I have to say, Mr. Speaker, that my family has been a little bit more hesitant to travel to the Nisku Costco in previous months because, unlike the city of Edmonton, there wasn't a mask bylaw in place in Nisku. So we felt a little anxious going into the Costco there because not everybody was wearing a mask. I want to give credit, actually, to Costco Canada, who actually now made it a rule that in all their stores there is a mask requirement. The Costco has the courage to enforce a mask bylaw in a way that this province so far and this Premier has not shown the courage to do. They took those measures, so we do still now travel down the highway, down QE II, to Nisku to go and pick up our groceries from Costco.

Certainly, Mr. Speaker, I can tell you that the families in my community, in my riding in Edmonton who travel down that highway would certainly be concerned to know that now, under Bill 43, should there be an expansion of the QE II, adding more lanes, they might now be facing tolls. Of course, people in Edmonton, the people in Alberta were told by this party that they were not going to put in tolls, yet now we see they are.

I want to give another example if I may, Mr. Speaker, because I represent the fantastic riding of Edmonton-Whitemud. A lot of the people in Edmonton-Whitemud travel quite frequently on Terwillegar Drive, which has been the subject of a lot of discussion for decades, actually, in my riding about expansion. We do know that the government recently announced that they would be reversing their former decision to cancel provincial funding for the Terwillegar expansion. They saw the error of their ways, and they are now actually providing some provincial funding to the expansion of Terwillegar Drive. Part of that new project scope includes a bridge, a bridge over the Anthony Henday, linking sort of the Windermere part, which is not part of my riding, to sort of the Terwillegar area, which is part of my riding. That bridge, if we look at the Traffic Safety Act, could certainly be considered a highway under the Traffic Safety Act. It is a bridge that goes over the Anthony Henday.

I think the Member for Edmonton-South, the Member for Edmonton-Glenora, we've raised some significant questions about what it means when it says that Bill 43 only applies to newly expanded highway infrastructure. Does that mean highway infrastructure that has already been announced, has already been completed, has already begun work? Certainly, I don't believe that any of the people in Edmonton-Whitemud were under the impression that there could be a toll on the new bridge over the Anthony Henday, but certainly under Bill 43 that is absolutely contemplated.

If that is the case, that it's not going to happen, we need that clarity because right now Bill 43 doesn't say that. My going back to the people in my riding and telling them, "I know you're happy that you're going to get a new bridge, a north bridge to get you off the Henday and onto Terwillegar Drive, but, I'm sorry, what the UCP didn't tell you was that you might now have to pay a toll to use that" – and in that situation, Mr. Speaker, I have to note that there is no alternate route. I'm not entirely sure how the people of Edmonton-Whitemud and Edmonton-South West and all the people in Edmonton who use that will be able to use an alternate, toll-free route to get off the Anthony Henday and onto Terwillegar Drive.

4:30

That's a question I have, Mr. Speaker, that I feel compelled to ask because I do believe that Bill 43 right now is incredibly unclear. What does it mean to be expanded highway infrastructure? There are absolutely direct implications for Albertans and for the people in my riding and the people all across this province because of how broadly this bill is drafted. And that goes back to, I believe, an issue of trust. We are very deeply concerned about Bill 43. What we're

saying is that we are very concerned about the fact that there has been no trust from this government.

On that, Mr. Speaker, I'd like to move to adjourn debate.

[Motion to adjourn debate carried]

Bill 41
Insurance (Enhancing Driver Affordability and Care)
Amendment Act, 2020

[Adjourned debate November 4: Mr. Jason Nixon]

The Speaker: It seems like the hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View would like to join in the debate.

Ms Ganley: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I am pleased to rise to speak to Bill 41. I think I'll start out by saying that this particular bill is, I think, for me, a large concern, and there are a number of reasons for that, which I will hopefully get through in the allotted time.

I'd like to begin by adding some sort of history and context because this has been a large debate between both sides of this particular House around the context that surrounds this bill. The UCP have repeatedly taken the position that the reason that we see these skyrocketing insurance rates going up at an average of 24 per cent was because they were previously capped to go up at only 5 per cent. The reason I think that this is a bit of an absurd position to take is that this is the same UCP government who feels that funding for enrolment growth in schools is ridiculous. It's okay for insurance companies to increase at 24 per cent a year without any evidence that that's necessary or that it's in any way driven by costs, but it's not okay to go up with a clear cost driver like the number of students you're educating. This is a grossly hypocritical position, I think, to take, and it's clear to me that this 24 per cent increase, this skyrocketing in insurance rates that is causing significant pain to the people of this province is occurring because the cap was removed.

You know, they try to paint it like this was a ridiculous thing, to put in a cap on insurance, but the cap wasn't for all time. I think we dealt with those insurance companies very reasonably in the sense that we had conversations, and we provided them with the opportunity to provide evidence. If you think that your costs are going up at greater than 5 per cent a year, even though inflation is nowhere near 5 per cent a year – if you want to argue that your costs need to go up at higher than 5 per cent a year, then provide us with some evidence for that. That doesn't seem like an unreasonable position to take, Mr. Speaker, to me, at all. Frankly, I think that anyone whose costs are exceeding growth and inflation ought to justify that. I think it's true of governments. I think it's true of private companies. I think it's true of anyone who's charging anyone costs. The idea that somehow by restricting them to only 5 per cent growth in previous years, suddenly we needed – it was required; there was no possible way we could've avoided – a 24 per cent increase in costs, I think is a bit absurd. I think that's the first point.

I think the other thing to note in this context is that this is a very challenging time for Albertans. People are out of work in disproportionate rates. COVID has had a huge impact on everything we do and the way we live. Drops in the price of oil in multiple instances have had huge impacts on Alberta, so this is a time when this is incredibly challenging for Albertans. Those insurance companies, by the UCP's own report, pocketed over \$820 million in additional premiums. In addition to this, they benefited from the \$4.7 billion corporate handout. So we have a government who has an enormous amount of sympathy for corporations that are

generating record profits for overseas shareholders but no sympathy for everyday Albertans who are struggling to pay for rent, pay for insurance, put food on the table. I think that that is sad, and it speaks to who they are as individuals in a fairly profound way.

Another point to raise about this bill is that when we look at what the impacts of this bill are, I think we need to take a GBA plus lens. GBA is gender-based analysis. This is something that the government used to do when the NDP was in power. They don't do it any longer. This isn't just about gender. It's basically an analysis of: in what appears to be a neutral role – we all know that neutral roles can have differential effects – who benefits and who gets left out? I think that with this bill who benefits and who gets left out are really critical factors.

A bill like this can't be extricated entirely from its context, from that context around costs and around who's benefiting from the changes in those costs. That is to say that large corporations and the shareholders of large corporations are benefiting, and Albertans who have to work for a living and have to pay those costs are being damaged as a result of those changes.

In addition, changes are being made to the regulations. One of the big changes that is being made to the regulations is a change to something called the minor injury regulation. Now, most Albertans will never have heard of the minor injury regulation. I heard of it fairly extensively in my time in government because there was a lot of lobbying from all angles on this particular file. Part of that context is that the minor injury reg is being altered to include more things. What happens with the minor injury regulation is that it essentially says that the court doesn't get to determine what your actual damages are.

Normally if someone commits a wrongful act and you are injured by that wrongful act, the court will say that the individual is liable, and then they will determine how much the individual is liable for. Normally that's based on things like, say, you couldn't work for a year or you can't work for the rest of your life. It's based on what your income was projected to be. You know, say that you have pain and suffering: it can be based on that. It can be based on any number of factors, but it's generally related to what you've suffered as a result of that wrongful act that someone else committed. I mean, this is a pretty fundamental principle in law. The minor injury regulation circumvents that principle, and it says that it doesn't matter what your damages were. It doesn't matter if you were disabled for the rest of your life. If you fall under this regulation, you are entitled to a very small amount of money and no more. I mean, certainly, it arguably increases efficiency but very much to the detriment of certain specific Albertans.

One of the things in specific – I mean, there are about a million things to talk about here – I wanted to talk about are concussions because concussions are now covered. For a long time in the history of the world we haven't really understood the long-term impacts of concussions, right? People have been getting concussions for a really long time, but I don't think that we knew that much about what that meant for the future of those individuals. There's been a lot of attention generated by severe concussions or by multiple concussions, and what that has generated is that this can have permanent damage, damage that lasts for the remainder of the plaintiff's life. That individual plaintiff can potentially be in a position where they can never return to their employment.

Again, in law as the law sort of stood prior to amendments, which is what we do in this place – I'm not suggesting anything untoward – there was something generally referred to as the thin-skull rule, which is to say that you take the plaintiff as you find them. If you commit a wrongful act against someone and that person is in some way vulnerable as a result of a pre-existing condition or, you know, any number of factors, the damage that that person suffers as a

result: you don't get to say that you're not responsible because they had a pre-existing condition. If you injure someone, you are responsible for the consequences of that action regardless of what state you found the individual in.

4:40

I think the challenge here is that if you're dealing with someone who's potentially had multiple prior concussions in their life, the impact of that new concussion is not going to be the same as the impact for someone who's never had a concussion. Someone who's never had a concussion, maybe – maybe – they're rightly caught by this rule. I would argue that they're not, but even if you could argue that they are, for someone who's had multiple prior concussions, this last concussion could disable them for life.

In fact, we've seen fairly famous cases of athletes, particularly in contact sports, who have wound up being the victims of suicide as a result of depression caused by multiple concussions. This is a real thing. It is recognized in the medical evidence. So the idea that someone could be permanently disabled to the point where they're so depressed that they're no longer able to work or may in fact take their own lives and they're limited to this very small amount of money, I think that's potentially injurious.

I think that that's something we should take very seriously into consideration when what lies on the other side of that is not the premiums of other individuals. We've clearly demonstrated through previous actions of this government that they don't care about the premiums of regular Albertans because they let them skyrocket at 24 per cent with no evidence. What this means is additional corporate profits. So when you talk about who's benefiting, shareholders are benefiting, and when you talk about who's potentially damaged, it's individuals out there walking around who may, unbeknownst to them, have sort of hit their maximum concussion number, and if they have another one, well, apparently they get a very small amount of money and have to move on and fend for themselves. I think that that is a major concern.

As to the rest of this bill I did have some questions, actually, that arise from this bill. One of those questions was that one of the things this does is that it alters the legislation overall. Let's take a simple example. This isn't going to apply in multiple contexts, but let's take a simple example. Previously if someone ran a red light and hit another vehicle that was just driving through the intersection, the person who committed the infraction, the person who ran the red light, would be responsible to pay for not only the damage to their car and themselves but the damage to the other car and the people in the other car. That will no longer be the case. Now it will be the case that each vehicle as insured will pay for their own damages regardless of who was at fault. Again, there are some efficiencies potentially to this system, but some potential challenges are created as well.

One of the interesting things I found – and I'm hoping that the minister will be willing to provide an answer to this. If you are driving around out there and you are wrongfully injured in an accident and you are wrongfully injured by someone who is driving uninsured, the government pays. The government has a fund – this resides in the Ministry of Justice and Solicitor General – which pays in the instance that someone is uninsured. Because this behaviour seems to have been increasing – that is, the behaviour of driving uninsured – over time, the draw on that fund has been going up at a significant rate. That's a problem because, again, governments are generally expected to keep their costs to population and inflation. Because we're seeing sort of more applications to this fund because of more sort of uninsured drivers, it's a cost driver, and on consolidated budgeting it does appear to contribute to the deficit. That's problematic.

I'm interested to see that sometimes there are multiple parties involved in an accident, and in this case it says that each insurance carrier is liable for the vehicle that they are insuring as long as one other automobile involved in the accident was "insured under a contract." What's interesting to me is that now if you have a person at fault who is potentially an uninsured person and there are multiple parties in the accident, it sounds to me like the insurers each have to pay for their individual person that they insure, which is potentially going to decrease the draw on that fund. I'm curious if that was a factor that went into this particular deliberation because I certainly haven't heard it said. That's, I think, an interesting question.

I think one of the other things – it doesn't make all of the changes, but it's suggestive of a direction in which the government is moving, and again it's a direction in which potentially injured parties are not compensated to the full extent of their injuries. I think that's problematic, because there are sort of two warring factors here, right? One is sort of like efficiency, and the other is justice. We believe – I think most of us believe – that if somebody commits a wrongful act, the other party ought to be compensated.

I'm sure I'll have another chance to address this.

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

Mr. Eggen: Well, indeed, I would like to oblige the Member for Calgary-Mountain View for another opportunity to elaborate on this issue and another one as well. I mean, the two things that I see with insurance in general and car insurance specifically is that you are looking to insure and to make sure that someone, just as you said, is compensated for injury and at fault as well but, on the other side, for insurance companies to be able to calculate risk, right? I mean, this is the essence of how they make a profit and how they can determine the degree of risk that an individual might be subjecting themselves and their car to on the road.

Something I see here, if the hon. member can elaborate on it, is this whole idea of microtargeting people and their insurance based on not just their driving behaviour and their age and the car and stuff like that but also the roads that they might be driving on and the place geographically where they live as well. There are roads that they are obliged to use. The number of new toll roads might exclude them from driving and having to go on a circuitous road, a route around the toll road because they can't afford it. I mean, I've seen this in jurisdictions in many places in the world where people literally – there will be the superhighway where you pay 10 bucks to go on, and there is the old highway that people might choose to go on because they don't have the extra money, and then that increases their risk. There are so many factors based on these two principles, both, you know, compensating someone who has been wronged and then how the actuary works in an insurance company, so if you could elaborate on that, I would be grateful.

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

Ms Ganley: Thank you very much, and thank you to the member for the question. The hon. member is absolutely right. This does affect people differentially. It affects them not only in terms of the rates that they pay but also in terms of the compensation that they may receive. Really, you know, people try to look at it as just sort of a two-party system, right? But really there are actually the rates that the individual pays, there are the profits that the corporation generates, and there is the sort of compensation that other individuals receive.

What we seem to be seeing in this case is that burden is being placed on the individuals paying the rates, so their rates are going up. Burden is being placed on the individuals seeking compensation, so

the circumstances under which they are compensated have shrunk, and the amount of compensation is being shrunk. The only thing that is being grown is profits. Now, in some circumstances there is nothing wrong with that, but in these circumstances, where other people are being asked to give up in order to generate those, I think it's extremely problematic. As the hon. member was saying, there are concerns around the way people are charged.

4:50

In fact, it disproportionately tends to fall on individuals who are already financially marginalized in a lot of ways because they have to live further away, they have to drive further, they have to take certain roads, and they live in certain neighbourhoods. As a result, those sorts of projections download costs onto them, so not only are they disproportionately affected there, but they're disproportionately affected by these increases. Those are individuals that were already in difficult circumstances, and then you add to that the impact on compensation, right?

You know, you see some pretty intense cases where individuals are severely injured. Now, a lot of these come out of sort of – if you look to the U.S., where they have sort of a private system for employees who are injured, I'm worried about seeing that here, right? I'm worried about seeing instances in which an individual is catastrophically injured, and they're not compensated, because then we have additional individuals who are even more vulnerable. That, too, is a big concern.

The Speaker: Hon. members, that concludes the time allotted for 29(2)(a).

Is there anyone else wishing to join in the debate? The hon. Member for Edmonton-Glenora has the call.

Ms Hoffman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker and to my colleague for warming us up to debate on Bill 41 here today. I know that it's specifically as it relates to insurance regarding drivers and automobiles.

[Mr. Loewen in the chair]

I can't help but reflect on the insurance industry as a whole and specifically what was the last – and we didn't know it was the last at the time. Brian Jean, when he was Leader of the Official Opposition, what ended up being his last question period – oh, he wasn't the leader then; he was a private member of the opposition – in this House was specifically about insurance and what he saw as the inequities of how people were being treated in Fort McMurray following the wildfires and the fact that there was what appeared to be quite subjective decisions being made about what would be covered under one person's policy or another. He specifically was calling for more continuity and more streamlining in the insurance industry as it related to individual citizens and their policies.

I know that much of what the couching of the language has been by the minister in regard to this was around choice and options. What I want to say about choice and options is that for most working families, they need the cheapest insurance. They need the lowest cost because they can't afford to pay exorbitant rates and premiums.

That was what Brian Jean was saying was impacting a lot of folks in his own riding, that a lot of folks had insurance that was what they perceived to be a good low-cost option, but when it came to actually what was covered when they lost their homes, their belongings, many of their livelihoods, it seemed unfair and unequal for what people needed. He wanted there to be greater certainty for consumers that they were going to be treated consistently and fairly

in the instance that they had need to file a claim. That stuck with me a little bit because, one, when we were leaving, I was cheeky and said something about public auto insurance, and he said something cheeky in return, I'm sure, but, two, because that was what he wanted his final word in this place to be, about the need for insurance to be there for ordinary folks when they needed it.

I'm deeply concerned with some of the changes that are being proposed in this bill at this point. Specifically, I'm concerned when the minister has stood in this place and said: well, there won't be changes to any major injuries; they won't be impacted. But one of the impacts specifically in this bill is to change what's counted as a major injury. Removing brain injuries from being a major injury: I think a lot of folks who've incurred brain injuries in their lifetime would say that there was nothing more major that they could have experienced. That, to me, I don't think is respectful of the intent that I come to this place with in terms of trying to make sure that people, the citizens, the folks who sent us here are the primary focus of decisions that we're making.

We also know that recently the auto insurance industry, through the UCP's own report that was just released at the end of October, that highlighted \$820 million in premiums from Albertans, had been paid an additional \$820 million in premiums in the last year. We know that many insurance companies had record profits last year. TD, I believe it was, had a specific report that said, "Could it get any better than this?" – that was the headline of the report – and how great their profits were and their dividends, in turn, to their shareholders. All of this at a time when this minister says that the industry is broken.

What I will say is that what is broken, in my opinion, is the fact that the government keeps bringing bills to this place that are corporate-focused and not citizen-focused, that are focused on profit margins for friends and insiders, including former campaign directors who've now turned insurance lobbyists. I don't think that that is in the best interests of the folks who we were elected to represent here. In turn, I don't think it's in the best interests of those of us who are here to be taking that as our primary driver in making decisions around legislation. I think that that probably doesn't sit well with most people in this House, just as the fact that folks were being hurt by the inequities in their insurance claims didn't sit well with Brian Jean when he asked his final question in this place.

The industry – and I just want to highlight the \$820 million in additional premiums. That works out to about \$190 per Albertan. Significant, I would say. When we look at other areas where government has chosen to prioritize corporations over citizens, \$4.7 billion works out to \$1,093 per Albertan. Those are big numbers that impact ordinary families in real and meaningful ways. To make changes to reduce the liabilities that would be paid out by insurance companies to folks who've suffered brain injuries, in my opinion, is one of the harshest pieces that's being proposed in this legislation. I think that people who experience brain injuries have real and lasting impacts, and I think that they are certainly major injuries for the vast majority.

I also want to say that I think that potential room in legislation and, in turn, regulation gives the insurance lobby virtually everything that they have been asking for. And they haven't just been asking it for 18 months. They absolutely asked for it while we were in government, but what our priority was was to make sure that we continued to have insurance available for citizens and that rates didn't go up astronomically. That's why we brought in a cap, and 5 per cent is still a significant increase. When people see an increase to a bill of 5 per cent, it's not small, but I'll tell you, it's a lot smaller than 24 per cent, which is what they've seen since that cap was eliminated by this government.

There were interviews that were asked around the same time that they did that about why they were eliminated, and it seemed like the Premier at the time – I know the Health minister was at one of the announcements – didn't even seem aware when the Q and A came. It was at an announcement of something else, and questions came specifically about insurance, that they had completely eliminated the cap. I think he said, "Oh, well, there's still one around 8 per cent" or something, and I get why he'd think that. That's what it used to be before we lowered the cap to 5 per cent and before the UCP completely eliminated it, and I think that that is really disrespectful to the folks who are left on the hook to pay for these insurance fees. I know that the Premier then stood in this House and said that he was lucky enough to see his insurance go down. Well, when you have people who are driving you everywhere in a vehicle that isn't personally owned, I imagine that your premiums probably would go down, when you're not driving yourself in your own vehicle, but there are – for most people that isn't an option.

At the same time, incomes have gone down because of the government's record on jobs, which resulted in a net reduction of 50,000 full-time jobs before the pandemic, and, of course, we know that even more families have been impacted economically and their own health as well since the pandemic.

5:00

It's deeply concerning to me that the government – you know, we're in this place, we're dealing with unprecedented pressures on families and the folks that we're representing, and we're here to find ways to make profit margins bigger for already profitable insurance companies. It's not exactly what I recall seeing highlighted in the platform that was shopped out to Albertans for so long during the campaign two years ago.

I have to say that the lack of focus on the needs of regular ratepayers and the lack of prioritization – for lobbyists and insiders who've been pushing for these things for years, now they're getting them. They're absolutely getting what they've been lobbying for. Ordinary folks shouldn't have to hire fancy lobbyists to have somebody think about what their interests are and what their priorities should be. They should have insurance that's comprehensive and fair and is there in the event of a life-impacting or a small claim, so be it. Insurance is there for the things that we can't afford to replace, we can't afford to fix on our own as a society. I know that my dad, when I bought technology, when I was buying my first stereo as a teenager, said: "Don't get the insurance. Even though it seems expensive to replace a stereo, you can afford to replace a stereo. The insurance isn't for that. It's for bigger things that we can't afford to replace like a car or our home or life insurance, of course, as well."

When it comes to automobile insurance – and I know many people have been frustrated by the lack of comprehensiveness of their home policies when it comes to things like northeast Calgary and the horrific hail that was experienced there or fire in Fort McMurray and the lack of consistent comprehensive coverage there, or when basements get flooded and you realize: oh, I didn't have coverage for this type of a crack in this part of my foundation; I just had coverage for other types of cracks in other parts of my foundation. Those types of impacts on a family's personal budget and well-being as well as their own mental health and well-being are significant, and I think that they are sweeping.

[The Speaker in the chair]

I would certainly prefer that the government come here with the lens of: how do we make sure that we protect those in times of crisis, in times of stress, and in times of anxiety? How do we make

sure that we are focused on the things that matter to the people who sent us here, not just lobbyist insiders who happened to be part of the campaign two years ago that brought you to this place? The campaign managers certainly played a role in where you are today, but it's individuals who voted for you that made the determination that you have the privilege of sitting in this place, all of us, and in what roles.

Continuing to ignore the needs of regular citizens when it comes to affordability and comprehensiveness I don't think reflects the priorities that we should be bringing to the opportunity when we get to draft legislation. That certainly is a rare privilege, to be able to be a law creator, a law drafter but also for those of us who are lawmakers, when we come to this place to vote and to consider how we want to amend the law to leave it better than the way we found it.

I have concerns that we are not doing that through this legislation. I think, again, our time here is precious and sacred and so are the laws that we are enacting. If we wanted to make it a real priority, I would hope that we'd heed the parting words of Brian Jean from this Assembly when he talked about the importance of having comprehensive, consistent, and people-centred legislation rather than focusing on opportunities to capitalize on ratepayers and policyholders when they're in some of the most difficult times of their life.

I think that would be a nice thing to focus on today and as this bill continues to be considered in this Legislature. Does it fit the intention that we have around consistent, fair, comprehensive coverage that is affordable for the people of this province?

I also know that some of my colleagues – and I was trying to remember who specifically it was, but given that we've changed the standing orders and we have the ability to move around, it's hard. I remember that it was somebody sitting in the second row, either on the end or one seat in, but I can't remember which member it was. I know it was a former Wildrose member, but it escapes me who specifically it was. It was a few days ago, so it escapes me.

An Hon. Member: Lacombe-Ponoka.

Ms Hoffman: You think it was Lacombe-Ponoka? Maybe it was Lacombe-Ponoka. I hope it was. If not, my apologies to the other former Wildrose member.

They were talking specifically about insurance in Alberta and insurance in Saskatchewan and how much better their friends had it in Saskatchewan. I think the part that they maybe weren't aware of or didn't remember was that in Saskatchewan it's public auto insurance. I'm not here saying that that's what we should be pushing today, but I am here saying that if you think somebody has got it right in a neighbouring province, look at why and look at what the results of that are and think about if you can apply some of those same principles to what you're proposing in this place. To go on at length about how much better it was in Saskatchewan – I know it probably was shocking because Saskatchewan, of course, has had a Conservative government for several terms now, but the Saskatchewan government, I think, is well aware that the people of Saskatchewan generally support having a number of Crown corporations and a number of initiatives that make life more affordable and make it more accessible as well. SaskTel is another one that they have.

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

Mr. Dang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I've got to say. My hon. colleague from Edmonton-Glenora: it's always a pleasure to hear from her and the stories she brings to this place. Particularly when

we're talking about a bill like this, which is going to touch, I would think, the majority of families across this province – basically, almost every family will have some impact, whether it's in their home insurance or their auto insurance or otherwise – I think that this is something that it's really important that we do hear about real experiences and lived experiences and the impacts it will have on those families.

We know that this government has made life more expensive for families in so many ways already – right? – sneakily raising the personal income tax, giving \$4.7 billion away to already wealthy and profitable corporations, and now we're seeing some significant changes, substantive changes, to the insurance policies in this province. I mean, I think that those types of impacts are just adding on to the pressures families are feeling right now in this global recession and in this unprecedented recession here in Alberta. I'd love to hear more from my colleague, some other stories about how this will impact Albertans.

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

Ms Hoffman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker and to my colleague for the question. Definitely, individual auto insurance – I think it was today in question period where the Finance minister said, “Well, by making these changes, we expect that insurance will be offset by \$120 per policyholder,” but he didn't say it would be reduced, right? He didn't say that insurance was going to go down. He said that it would be offset by that. I think that was the specific word. I should be pulling the Blues, so don't hold if the exact word wasn't “offset.” But basically the indication was that it would go up far more than \$120, so now it'll only go up something minus \$120. There still was basically a justification that there would be a net increase and probably a substantial one.

The minister keeps talking about the industry being broken, but I have to say – and we did receive the same threats when we were in government. Insurance companies absolutely said: we're going to leave; we're going to pack up if you cap rates at 5 per cent. But we were able to cap rates at 5 per cent. They were able to continue to make profits, not as record-breaking as they are this year, that's for sure, but they also were continuing to operate here. Of course, we want companies to operate here. We want them to be able to be employers and provide services to communities, but the job of government is to create a fair playing field for companies with each other but also with clients.

When we have an industry that has clearly got the ear of government and the government has made virtually every change that has been lobbied for on insurance to date – I imagine even more will come in the future given the track record that insurance lobbyists have had in representing and getting changes through this government – it has had a direct impact that, I would say, has been quite negative for many Alberta families who have to, of course, use transportation themselves and don't have government-provided drivers and vehicles to use. These are some of the concerns, affordability but also comprehensiveness, that I know have been raised with myself and many of my colleagues in this Legislature, and I'm sure that they've been raised with members of the government caucus as well.

5:10

The brain injury piece, I think, is really an absolute step backwards. I think it's cruel, and I think that it is something that we will reflect on, should it proceed, with probably some shame. I think that there are a lot of people who expect better from their government and expect some semblance of compassionate decision-making when these types of things come forward. I know

that the phrase “compassionate conservatism” has been used before. I would say that this is not compassionate, and I don't even know that it's conservative. I think that conservative implies some sense of stability and continuity and not being erratic, and I would say that in a lot of ways I think that this doesn't meet that test of what it means or had at one time meant to be conservative.

I think that for those reasons, those are some of my concerns that I have raised, and I do hope that the government responds to them in a way that makes this bill better than the current legislation, not worse. I think that this bill right now is probably moving in the wrong direction. I think that it's really about picking pockets and driving up profits for corporations.

Thank you.

The Speaker: Hon. members, that concludes the time allotted for 29(2)(a).

Is there anyone else wishing to join in the debate on the main bill? The hon. the Member for Edmonton-North West.

Mr. Eggen: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate the opportunity to speak to Bill 41, which is the Insurance (Enhancing Driver Affordability and Care) Amendment Act, 2020. You know, I can't help but again question the choice of titles for some of these bills that we've seen this term because it's almost as though they are deliberately labelled as something that they're not. It's quite the opposite, really.

As I learn more about this bill and read it over and listen to debate, I'm struck with the thought that if insurance lobbyist groups were to be coming into the UCP government's chambers, I think that you could virtually see all of the asks from the insurance industry to this government reflected in this bill here that we have before us this afternoon: raising the rates for individuals and for companies here in the province an average of 24 per cent, reducing the coverage that we see from these insurance policies for soft tissue injury and other brain injuries and so forth and reducing or capping how much an individual would get from those infractions, changing the way by which an actuary might be able to determine a rate based on risk – right? – including this idea of a geographic determination of actuarial risk. I wanted to risk saying “actuarial”; I practised it in my mind a couple of times before I came up here.

Of course, I mean, that lies at the essence of what insurance and how insurance is determined. It's very important for this legislative body to regulate the determination of insurance because, number one, it's a legal obligation to have insurance. To be on the road, you need to have insurance, so that presupposes that this legislative body makes sure that it's affordable, that it provides the coverage that you and your family need when you're on the road, and that the general public and the public interest is served as well for damages and risk and so forth. We know that automobiles cause a lot of injuries and cost in our society. They provide a tremendous benefit in regard to transportation and movement of goods and services and so forth, but they also are very expensive.

I'm kind of struck this afternoon, Mr. Speaker, with the notion that this is kind of like automobile afternoon here at the Legislature with the toll roads being thrust upon us here earlier this afternoon and now a big hike in auto insurance rates, too. It seems as though the government has sort of a theme day going on here, charging and making life more expensive for regular families here in the province with these two bills.

You know, when I see anything come forward in this Legislature, I look at two things, right? Why is it coming now, and how does it affect affordability for the citizens and residents of our province? To the first question, I asked the question to the minister: why was this cap, that was put in place at 5 per cent, so abruptly ended and

then ended right in the face of the emerging pandemic that we are all experiencing here in the province of Alberta as well?

I've heard so many stories of people that are either not commuting to their jobs anymore or maybe were caught in the massive hailstorm in June in northeast Calgary or have lost their jobs and so are not using their cars as much because of those different factors that we've all been experiencing. Indeed, we probably can think of our own personal experiences in regard to changing circumstances. Yet with the reduced use of cars in service for commuting and all these different things, their insurance rates still went up. I mean, that tells you something right there, that, again, the system requires regulation that determines – you know that when you pick up your insurance, they say, “Do you drive it to work?” You say, “Yeah, I do.” Then they set that at a certain rate.

Well, Mr. Speaker, lo and behold, a lot of people's lives have changed quite a lot in the last few months, but still this Finance minister, who is more and more looking like, really, one of the very worst Finance ministers in this entire country in the face of this pandemic, I would venture to say, is not looking at the face of reality but looking at this stubborn insistence on the plan that he somehow concocted a year and a half ago. This is one of those parts of that plan that was concocted a year and a half or two years ago, probably, with all of those auto insurance lobbyists so insistent on creating these reforms that tilt the balance to the industry and not the people which they are meant to be serving. The results are playing out in the midst of circumstances that are getting worse by the day. So while people are losing jobs, staying home, not using their cars as much, looking for ways to economize, suddenly these insurance bills come in the mail, and, lo and behold, they've gone up precipitously. My question is: why do that now of all times, and why be so stubbornly tied to this idea that was somehow cooked up a couple of years ago, when the world was a much different place?

I would also like to ask rhetorically and also with an insistence that we do get an answer: why would a concussion ever be considered a minor injury? What medical evidence does this reflect, what practical world experience does this reflect, and how did this government come to that determination? Was it part of a brief that insurance companies brought as a wish list of ways by which we could change the definition of a concussion in the province of Alberta? Are those documents available to show how these lobbyists moved forward on trying to reduce the impact and the importance and the significance of concussions in an accident here in the province? I'm curious to know what evidence does exist. Of course, the medical evidence and the experiential evidence, that we all have and can see from across the world, flies in the face of this decision in here, in Bill 41.

5:20

I'm concerned that, again, this bill has been sitting sort of in idleness and sort of in limbo for quite a number of months. We heard about this last December, so it's been almost 11 months of hashing this out. In the interim, as I said, of course, the world has changed in regard to the pandemic, but in the ensuing 11 months who and what did they consult with to come to these conclusions of a deeply flawed bill? I'm curious to know: what advocacy groups did they talk to, what medical groups did they talk to, and so forth?

I know they talked to the insurance industry. That's abundantly obvious. The fingerprints of the insurance industry lobbyists are all over this document. As my hon. colleague had pointed out before, several prominent Conservative lobbyists used to work for the campaign for the UCP election. I know other lobbyists that I've seen around this place for 10, 15 years; I see their names on these documents, right? They've made good money for a long time doing this kind of lobbying, and they've hit payday. You can imagine that

when the new Premier-elect drove his big blue truck onto the stage and everybody was cheering, they were cheering for the victory, but these guys were cheering because it was going to be, like, a car insurance payday coming in a few months for them, tilting the balance by changing these laws, tilting the balance against individuals to the big insurance companies, who were looking for this change.

I'm curious to know about this spurious argument that, you know, the 5 per cent cap was resulting in people not wanting to bother to insure people here in the province, so the insurance was not there to be had. I never saw any sign of that. I saw insurance companies moving, dynamic as they were and nimble as some of them were, into the province to provide insurance for Albertans. It's not as though the – you know, there was perhaps less of a fantastic profit to be had with a 5 per cent cap, but I think that that 5 per cent cap pretty much reflected the consumer price index, the CPI, that we use to measure inflation for all of the goods and services that we consume here in our society. Five per cent is not out of the question.

I recall the comments from the hon. Member for Calgary-Mountain View, that you certainly need to make a considerable argument to convince and to, you know, make something logical where you would exceed 5 per cent. Like, what's the reason, right? Just because it was 5 per cent and now it's time to make it 24 per cent because the gates have opened and the sky has parted and the clouds have parted and it's back to the glory days for getting ripped off by insurance companies?

I hate to give advice to the government here about politics, but, I mean, you know, this one you have to think about. Think about it hard, think about it twice, and think about it tonight when you go to bed, because it will haunt you, and that is that when you're overconfident and you think you can get away – I've heard these guys talk left, right, and centre, Mr. Speaker, about the biggest election victory in the history of whatever. If you keep saying that to yourselves too much, you start to make mistakes, and I would suggest that this Bill 41, jacking up insurance rates, making life less affordable for Albertans, is a big mistake that's rooted, at least partially, in overconfidence.

So don't take my advice. You know, just keep on going the way you're going, right? Keep on cracking those beers open and having a grand old time about how you won a victory that is now almost two years old in a province that's changed considerably, with a population that is very well educated and has their ear to the ground on these things, especially during an economic downturn, where they can't just say: “Oh, yeah, they jacked up my rates. Too bad. We'll just write another cheque.” A lot of people don't have that extra money to pay for their car insurance at this point because of the economic downturn, because the pandemic circumstances have changed.

Again, my advice on a legislative level is to reconsider this massive increase in rates, lifting the cap during this crisis. I think it would be a sign of goodwill to the people of Alberta. I think it would be a sign of recognition of the necessity for most families to have a vehicle and to have car insurance and would remind ourselves that this is not like buying a trip to Mexico or, you know, water skis or something like that. It is buying something that people are legally bound to possess based on laws that we make in this Chamber. If we somehow create too much of a gap between what we are legally obliging people to buy and their capacity to buy that thing in the market, then we're not doing our job, right? It's as simple as that.

We're certainly not saying, you know, to go to public auto insurance, because that's not the consideration here. The consideration is to look for a practical solution that keeps cars on the road and keeps body and soul together for Albertans during a

very difficult time. That's where the cap came through. The cap was at 5 per cent, and it matched CPI fairly closely, I would say, over the last couple of years. Now more than ever we need to provide that certainty for Albertans for the essential services that they need to put a roof over their family's heads, to put food in the fridge, and to keep the car going, especially during the winter.

I mean, those are simple things, but sometimes you have to boil legislation down to its different components, right? You know, people are maybe not going to read through these bills like we . . .

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

Ms Pancholi: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. One of the pleasures I have in standing in this House as a newer member of a caucus with people who have incredible experience is getting to hear their ability to share their experiences, like the Member for Edmonton-North West, who, you know, has actually seen quite a lot of things in this House. He's sat in many different roles and seen many different government caucus members come through these doors and different governments, been part of government, been a minister. His insights and perspective are always so valuable to me. I'm reminded that I appreciate, you know – and I'm certain that perhaps the government members are not as appreciative of the advice that he gives, but I think they would be wise to take it because he comes at it with an incredible amount of experience and having seen a lot of things.

Certainly, within his time in government and seeing the lobbying that happens from large companies, particularly insurance companies, what I appreciated from his comments was his ability, when he was in government, to be able to stand true to what he believed and what we believe the obligations of government are to Albertans, which is to create that level playing field in a relationship that is particularly imbalanced. I think that that's a continuing theme that we've seen in a number of pieces of legislation, where this opposition is incredibly proud to stand up for workers, for individual Albertans, for working parents, because there is often that power imbalance.

I very much appreciated the comments he made about the fact that, yes, car insurance is a legal necessity. It is not a choice. It is not an option. It is not something that most families can treat as a luxury. It's something that they absolutely have to have, and we require them to have that for good reasons. There are very good reasons why we require insurance in this province and across the country. But it does mean that we also have to make it so that it's not impossible for average working families to attain. As we know, we live in a very widespread province, where driving is part of most of our lives. It's a necessity not only for our work and to do our jobs but also to do the things with our family that we all enjoy, finding that balance between, "Yes, you have to have insurance" and that we have an obligation as government to make it something that's accessible and attainable and not be driven by high-pressure tactics from large corporations who are not driven by making sure that the average family can necessarily pay all their bills but is really driven by a profit motive.

I mean, their rightful statutory motive and their fiduciary obligation to their shareholders is to create a profit. I think what we have seen is that, clearly, that has not been a problem for insurance companies in this province. They made record profits not just this year, when, of course, the UCP government lifted the insurance cap on them, but they've had record profits even for years before that, even at the time when there was an insurance cap on.

5:30

Part of the concern here, Mr. Speaker, and I hear it echoed in the comments from the Member for Edmonton-North West, is that, you know, simply making the profit margin bigger for corporations provides no assurances. In fact, we hear no assurances either from insurance companies or from this government that that's actually going to translate to lower policies and lower premium rates for Albertans. Really, where is the balancing that this government has a duty to do? They are here to represent not insurance companies; they're here to represent the individual constituents of their ridings who will be affected. How does making car insurance more expensive really serve their needs?

I just wonder perhaps if the Member for Edmonton-North West wanted to share any parting words of wisdom because I know that I very much value listening to that, and I certainly encourage the government members to listen to someone who's been an advocate for average Albertans for well over a decade in this House. I invite him to do that.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Eggen: Well, thank you. The comments from Edmonton-Whitemud in no way reflect the state of my – you know, I'm here. I'm going to be here for a long time. I'm going to run again, so it's not like I need parting words, by any means. It's fun how time moves on. You go from being the junior member to the senior member. It's all good, right?

I mean, the thing that I'm concerned about is this, right? Insurance is real, and it does provide security and compensation for someone who has had an injury. You know, people's lives are altered from these injuries and so forth, but it's also still a fairly abstract thing and quite arbitrary as well, as the hon. Member for Lacombe-Ponoka pointed out.

The Speaker: Hon. members, that concludes the time allotted for 29(2)(a).

Is there anyone else wishing to speak? The Member for Calgary-McCall.

Mr. Sabir: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to speak to the Insurance Amendment Act. In brackets it says "Enhancing Driver Affordability and Care". I can't think of anything further from the truth. The government's handling of this insurance file, auto insurance file, has been a complete mess, and Albertans are paying the price.

These are the same companies who benefited from government's \$4.7 billion failed no-jobs corporate handout, and now they're getting another windfall from this government. I have had the opportunity to talk about insurance with many of my constituents. I have had the opportunity to learn about insurance from many Albertans in my constituency, people from Calgary-Falconridge, people from Calgary-North East, those in particular who were impacted by the fourth-largest natural disaster, the June 13 hailstorm.

I think, based on those conversations, that I can say that insurance is fundamental to how people manage the risk. It's fundamental for the smooth operation and functioning of our society. When we were in government, we capped the insurance rates to make sure that all Albertans can afford and access insurance. The government disagrees that that was the right thing to do but without any evidence whatsoever. The government's own report says that over that same period insurance companies made \$820 million, so in no way, shape, or manner was having that cap affecting the operations of or the profitability of those insurance companies, and government, without even looking at evidence, as soon as they

became government, removed that cap. That resulted in a huge increase in insurance bills for Albertans.

I think that everyone or most, I can say, people do have insurance of some sort, whether it's auto insurance or home insurance, and when these rates go up, they impact Albertans. They impact Albertans all across this province, all across our constituencies.

As I said, over the period of the last five or six months I've heard countless stories that because this government removed that cap, it made insurance so expensive that when they lost jobs or their hours got reduced during the pandemic, they had to decide whether they want to put food on the table or insurance on their cars. In part, I think, those were the circumstances of many people in my riding, in Calgary-Falconridge, in Calgary-North East. They found themselves without insurance and suffered so much damage because of the June 13 hailstorm, and part of the reason was that the insurance rate was so high that they thought that it would be the right thing for them to do, since their jobs have gone, since the pandemic is impacting their bottom line, that they take insurance off and put food on the table.

The government's decision to remove the cap clearly resulted in hardship for many Albertans across this province. People in my riding in northeast Calgary were particularly hit hard because they already earn less than the rest of the quadrants in Calgary. For instance, in my riding in neighbourhoods like Taradale, Saddle Ridge, and Martindale the average individual income is around \$30,000, whereas Calgary's average income is \$42,500, so they are already making less. These are the kinds of policies that particularly hit people in low-income brackets hard. As I said, in my riding there are newcomers, there are people who work minimum wage jobs, there are people who are on fixed incomes. It's the case in Calgary-North East and it's the case in Calgary-Falconridge as well, pretty much the entire quadrant. This particular policy of this government hit these people the hardest.

Now the government is saying that their changes will make improvements somehow. They added the words "Affordability and Care" in their bill as well. But the thing is that nothing the government is doing in this legislation will make insurance premiums any cheaper.

5:40

What government is doing: government is doing two things. Government is trying to help their insurance industry friends to lower their operating costs by changing the process of how people can make claims and all those things. They're lowering their costs by capping payout rates. But nowhere in this piece of legislation is anything mentioned that once insurance operating costs get lower, they will lower the premiums.

It's the same kind of deal, what they did with the \$4.7 billion corporate handout, where they handed out that money ...

Ms Hoffman: How much?

Mr. Sabir: Four point seven billion dollars.

... and told Albertans that it will bring investment, that it will bring jobs, and none of that happened. We lost 50,000 jobs. We lost investment. Government policy failed.

They are doing the same thing. They are just giving whatever the insurance industry is asking of them, and they are just, I guess, hoping that once the good folks in the insurance industry are content with their profit and profit margins, eventually they will lower the insurance premiums. That's not a good policy. That's not a good bill, and in particular, in this struggling economy, in the middle of this pandemic, this bill shouldn't move forward.

That's why I'm bringing forward an amendment on behalf of the Member for Edmonton-McClung. I can read that into the record whenever, Mr. Speaker, you want me to.

The Speaker: If you want to just pause, we'll have the pages deliver the original to the table, and after I've received a copy and we've named the amendment, then you can proceed.

Hon. members, the amendment will be referred to as REF1.

Mr. Sabir: On behalf of the Member for Edmonton-McClung I move that the motion for second reading of Bill 41, Insurance (Enhancing Driver Affordability and Care) Amendment Act, 2020, be amended by deleting all of the words after "that" and substituting the following: "Bill 41, Insurance (Enhancing Driver Affordability and Care) Amendment Act, 2020, be not now read a second time but that the subject matter of the bill be referred to the Standing Committee on Resource Stewardship in accordance with Standing Order 74.2."

The Speaker: Feel free to proceed. You have four minutes and 24 seconds remaining should you choose to use it.

Mr. Sabir: Sure. Thank you. The reason for this amendment is, as I said, that government has jacked up the rates of insurance on every single Albertan at a time when they're already struggling with a slowing economy, when they're struggling with a global pandemic, and that's on top of other costs that have been downloaded onto Albertans such as their personal income tax has been increased through bracket creep, their school fees have been increased and transferred onto the parents. There are many other additional expenses that have been off-loaded onto Albertans.

I think that there is no evidence that the insurance industry was not making profits or that their viability was in question when there was a rate cap. I think government's decision is without any evidence on that basis whatsoever. Over that period, as I indicated earlier, the insurance industry made \$820 million in profit. These are the same companies who have also benefited from the \$4.7 billion handout, that didn't create any jobs. Now, the things that have been included in this act are that the government is trying to sell to Albertans through this bill that by lowering operational costs of insurance companies, which are at the expense of everyday Albertans, at some point insurance companies will lower their premiums.

It's not a good bill. The process that has been included in this bill doesn't show that it will result in lower insurance premiums. Rather, this bill clearly shows that if we pass this piece of legislation, people will have less coverage for their injuries, people may have limited options in terms of coverage, and they will have fewer options in terms of how they proceed with their legal claims. All these steps will result in lower protections for Albertans, will result in lower benefits for Albertans, and nowhere in this legislation is it mentioned that there will be any decrease in insurance premiums.

As I said earlier, it's exactly the same kind of policy that was their \$4.7 billion corporate handout, where they said that we will give money to corporations and corporations will take that money, they will invest, and they will create jobs, and ultimately Albertans will benefit. What we saw is that that didn't happen. They took the money, and some of them moved down south, some of them moved their investment down south, most of them laid off Albertans, and Albertans didn't see any benefits.

In this case it's the exact same kind of policy. We will see corporations' operating costs going down, but Albertans won't see any benefits whatsoever.

The Speaker: Hon. members, Standing Order (29)(2)(a) is available. I see the Associate Minister of Red Tape Reduction has risen.

Mr. Hunter: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have been listening to the debate this afternoon and trying to understand the rationale for the debate on the NDP side. Then I heard the referral motion. I don't think that we've heard the NDP support one of our strong cases for Albertans to get back to work, and it's unfortunate that we continue to see this. Hey, I get that. I mean, I was in opposition once before as well, and I didn't really appreciate the direction the NDP took. But I believe that the arguments from the NDP side can be summed up from a fundamental misunderstanding of free-market economics. I think that the reason why the NDP misunderstand and really mistrust the free market economy is because they do not like business. They just don't like business.

Now, I know that the hon. member has called a point of order on this issue before. But if you take a look at the way that they speak about our job creators, they cannot come to say those words. They cannot come to say that these are actually job creators, that we have a symbiotic relationship in any thriving economy between those who employ and those who are the employed.

5:50

They can't understand that a good, strong economy has to have those two parts. I applaud them for fighting for employees. Look; I've been an employee before. I understand that sometimes there are bad actors in the employer realm, but the problem is that they're not all bad actors. We have some bad actors, but not all of them are bad actors. In fact, the large majority of them are good actors.

Now, Mr. Speaker, their argument that we shouldn't trust free-market forces or free-market economics: we have a hundred years or longer, actually a couple of hundred years, of showing how when this works properly, you can create prosperity, wealth, and stability for Albertans and for the world, to tell you the truth. Again, I find that the NDP love to go back to revisionist history in order to be able to describe their debate arguments.

There was an interesting quote that I read from Thomas Sowell, one of my favourite economists, who said:

The first lesson of economics is scarcity: there is never enough of anything to fully satisfy all those who want it. The first lesson of politics is to disregard the first lesson of economics.

This is a problem that the NDP seem to have. They don't seem to understand that you cannot create rules for everything, that when you jump in front of the speed of what a free market works in, you usually cause lots of problems. This is what happened when the NDP decided to get involved in the insurance game. They decided that they were going to establish these caps, and what it did is that it just drove out the supply. It was a measure to try and restrict supply, and that's actually what happened, Mr. Speaker. It drove out the supply.

The supply and demand will create the equilibrium. If you don't mess around with that, the equilibrium will find its proper place. That's simple economics. [interjections] Unfortunately, the NDP are heckling because still they don't understand this, this one principle. They don't understand the simple economics. We've had these debates, actually, for about 400 years, but I guess they don't understand that. [interjections] They're still heckling. It's actually comical that they still don't get it.

Mr. Speaker, the interesting thing about their argument is that they say that we need to go back to a cap. In reality we have antitrust laws in Canada that if there is collusion that is going on, bring forward the evidence. Show us the evidence so that we understand and can go after them with the laws that we already have in Canada.

We don't have to add caps or mess around with the supply. Let free markets work. If there is collusion and if we do have a situation where these antitrust laws are being worked on, then we can actually work through that. The other arguments they're making are not working.

The Speaker: Unfortunately, that concludes the time allotted for 29(2)(a).

Is there anyone else wishing to speak to amendment REF1? The hon. Member for Edmonton-South.

Mr. Dang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a pleasure to rise today and speak to amendment REF1. I think that it's quite important that we do consider this referral amendment at this time. I mean, I want to thank my hon. colleague from Calgary-McCall for introducing this. He's done some incredible work on fighting to get justice for all the residents of northeast Calgary who suffered some substantial hail damage in the storm not too long ago here in Alberta.

I think that when we look at the changes coming through this legislation, we're looking at changes that this government is introducing. The additional cost this government is really asking Alberta taxpayers and Alberta families to pay, that's the type of — my colleague here from Calgary-McCall is the type of person I want to be fighting beside. We're fighting every single day to make life more affordable. We're fighting every single day to stand up for families who have suffered substantial losses. We're fighting every single day to work with Calgarians and Albertans across this province to make their lives more affordable and make their lives better.

I think that's the foundational basis of why we're here today, of why we, in the opposition, continue to fight. I mean, I think it's very interesting that the associate minister of red tape got up in this place just moments ago and spoke at length about economics and the ideologies and all these things. I know my colleague for Calgary-McCall has a degree in economics. Certainly, I think that when we look at these issues and we look at what we're fighting for in this place, it's about values, right? It's about: who are we standing up for? It's about: why are we fighting in this place? It's about: why do we spend all this time trying to get elected and trying to fight for Albertans?

Mr. Speaker, to be very clear, the reason that our opposition is opposed to this bill is because we believe that it will make life more difficult for Albertans when they're already struggling because of this pandemic, because of the 50,000 jobs lost before the pandemic by this government, because of the \$4.7 billion given away by this government to wealthy and profitable corporations, because of the increased personal income taxes they're bringing in, because of all these measures that are making life more expensive for Alberta families, then here again we see in the insurance industry that they are trying to make life more expensive.

It appears that the Premier's former campaign director is now a high-ranking lobbyist in the insurance industry. That's what we're seeing. We see this legislation come in that rapidly removed the cap on insurance prices and then, suddenly, now we're seeing changes that will cost families more, right, Mr. Speaker? We are seeing changes that will cost families more. We are seeing changes that will make Albertans suffer, basically, it seems to be, to please the Premier and the government's friends and donors. I think that's what's most disappointing about the values that this government is bringing to this place, the values that this government is using to fight in this place.

I'm pleased to be supporting this referral amendment because I certainly think at this time that we do need to put the brakes on this legislation. We need to stop, and we need to think about why

we're here. We need to think about who we're trying to help. We need to think about how this legislation helps. I know my colleague from I believe it's Calgary-Buffalo mentioned earlier that there is always somebody who benefits when we change legislation, right? There's somebody that benefits and somebody who loses when we change legislation, and it's very clear that this legislation makes it so that Albertans lose, right? Albertans lose. Calgarians lose. Edmontonians lose. Everybody loses except for wealthy and profitable insurance companies, who already benefited from the \$4.7 billion corporate handout, who already benefited from this government's giveaways to wealthy and profitable corporations.

Instead of them trying to discover and introduce legislation that would help families, they decided to help line the pocketbooks of their friends and donors. They decided to help line the pocketbooks of the former campaign director of the Premier. Indeed, we are fighting now. The government seems to be fighting for insurance companies, right? Mr. Speaker, I think that's pretty disappointing. I think it's pretty disappointing because this opposition is committed to trying to make life more affordable or committed to trying to fight to make families have a better future here in Alberta. We want families to succeed and excel in Alberta. Instead of

fighting for any of those values, the associate minister got up in this place and talked about how he needed to fight to line the pocketbooks of wealthy and profitable insurance companies.

Those are the values that we're talking about here. That's the type of discord we're having here in this Chamber today, Mr. Speaker. That's what's so disappointing, that we're not even talking about the same things. We're talking about trying to make life more affordable in the opposition, and on the government side they're talking about giving \$4.7 billion away to wealthy and profitable corporations.

We know that this is the worst Finance minister that has ever existed here in this province because we've seen it time and time again. He's lost \$1.6 billion in the latest Auditor General report, he's given \$4.6 billion away, and now families are getting the short end of the stick with his bill here as insurance rates are going to skyrocket and have been skyrocketing for the last year.

Thank you.

The Speaker: I hesitate to interrupt, but pursuant to Standing Order 4(1) the House stands adjourned until this evening at 7:30.

[The Assembly adjourned at 6 p.m.]

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