



Province of Alberta

The 30th Legislature
Second Session

Alberta Hansard

Tuesday afternoon, March 9, 2021

Day 81

The Honourable Nathan M. Cooper, Speaker

Legislative Assembly of Alberta
The 30th Legislature
Second Session

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Independent: 1

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Legislative Assembly of Alberta

1:30 p.m.

Tuesday, March 9, 2021

[The Speaker in the chair]

Prayers

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

Please be seated.

Members' Statements

Postsecondary Education Funding

Mr. Eggen: Budget 2021 has cut postsecondary in the province of Alberta by \$135 million. Since taking office, accounting for population and inflation, this government has cut \$690 million from our universities, colleges, and polytechnics. Mr. Speaker, that's a total reduction of 23 per cent. This UCP government has also increased tuition for our students to the tune of \$387 million, and we have lost more than 1,500 full-time equivalent postsecondary jobs. And this UCP government has only been in power for two years.

Our universities, colleges, and polytechnics are one of the strongest tools we have for economic recovery in Alberta. Postsecondary can and should be the economic engine of our province. The students that learn in these schools will be our future leaders, our innovators, the people who can take this great province into the future, but not if we saddle them with record debt, not if we fail to support them during the pandemic where nearly half have lost their jobs, and not if we continue to jack up tuition by hundreds or even thousands of dollars every single year.

Minister, I'm asking you on behalf of the thousands of students, faculties, industry leaders, and Albertans in general to please stop with the cuts. Stop taking away this economic opportunity for our future. I invite you all to sign up at albertasfuture.ca for upcoming consultations in technology, postsecondary, and getting women back to work. Who knows? You might even learn a thing or two.

Thank you.

COVID-19 Response and Economic Recovery

Ms Armstrong-Homeniuk: Mr. Speaker, the COVID-19 pandemic has created a stressful and frustrating situation for many Albertans. During this pandemic we have seen Albertans be resilient in keeping each other safe and healthy, but some have had to make sacrifices as the economic hardships of the pandemic came to light. Our government knew that we had to act in order to protect both the lives and livelihoods of Albertans. Alberta's government put the necessary health restrictions in place in order to bend the curve.

We handed out 40 million free masks when the supply was scarce and boosted health care funding to \$500 million to test, trace, and treat COVID-19 patients. Alberta's government came up with a well-rounded vaccine distribution plan that not only protects the most vulnerable and those on the front lines of health care but also ensures that everyone who wants a COVID-19 vaccine will get one.

We also increased mental health supports to 24/7 access, in addition to removing user fees for addiction treatment beds.

To support small and medium-sized businesses during the pandemic, Alberta's government created the small and medium enterprise relaunch grant. This offers financial assistance of up to \$20,000 to Alberta organizations, including businesses, co-operatives, and nonprofits that were ordered to close or curtail their operations. We also expanded this grant for up to \$15,000 for new small and medium-sized businesses that started between March 1 and October 31, including sole proprietors.

Alberta's government also supported livelihoods by providing various grants to Albertans. We provided the isolation grant of \$625 for people who must isolate or quarantine and cannot do so safely in their home. There are also financial supports of \$561 per child for working parents who need child care during the pandemic. And to appreciate those that had been working on the front lines, Alberta's government has provided the critical worker benefit.

I'm proud of the work Alberta's government has done to support the lives and livelihoods of Albertans. Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Central Peace-Notley.

Spinal Muscular Atrophy Treatment Coverage

Mr. Loewen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Just over two years ago a young couple in the constituency I represent welcomed a new baby into this world, Max. From the very beginning little Max had the odds set against him. He was born premature. It took lots of medical expertise and equipment to keep him going in those early days. After a lengthy stay in the hospital, he overcame the odds and grew into a bright-eyed bundle of joy who brightened the day of everyone around him.

As he grew older, problems in his physical development occurred. When examined at the hospital, the diagnosis was grim. The boy who had conquered the odds from a premature birth now faced type 2 spinal muscular atrophy unrelated to his premature birth. Previous treatments for this condition only delayed the effects of the condition.

Luckily, there is a new treatment called Zolgensma that has shown to have long-lasting, positive results for those suffering from SMA. The problems with Zolgensma were that it was not approved for use in Canada, its funding was not approved, and it was incredibly expensive. Another hurdle was the time limit; Max needed this before his second birthday.

Thankfully, the community rallied around him. Before long, donations were pouring in. Unfortunately, the multimillion-dollar price tag to the treatment was a tall order, but that did not dissuade the outpouring of support. From all over the region and soon all over Alberta donations and letters of support poured in, and I'm happy to have played a small part in bringing Max's case the attention it deserved.

Just recently Zolgensma received federal approval, and thanks to the support from our Alberta Minister of Health, funding was also approved. I am further grateful that the Minister of Health has paved the way for families and children like Max to access the cutting-edge treatments they need. Max's doctor applied on behalf of Max and approval was received, with a few conditions, but I am so happy to say that it looks like Max has met these conditions and will be receiving this treatment a week from today at the Stollery.

I invite all members of this House to join me in hope and prayers that all will go as planned on Tuesday for Max and also to help me celebrate Mighty Max, a story of hope, perseverance, and an example to us all.

Budget 2021

Mr. Dang: It has been almost two weeks since the UCP government dropped their new budget. That's given us time to dig into the numbers and see what's in it but, most importantly, what's missing. From cuts to education, health care, and forcing you to pay more in income tax, nickel and diming you through increased fees like campsite bookings, this UCP government is taking more money out of your pocket and delivering less in return.

Budget 2021 provides \$632 million less for our public health care system if we simply kept up with inflation and population growth. That's despite the increased demand of the COVID-19 pandemic and the backlog of surgeries that's been created as a result. The Premier has also continued to attack our postsecondary and is hurting our prospects for long-term economic recovery by cutting \$300 million from Alberta's postsecondary institutes and driving tuition costs for students up for the third year in a row. Again students will be paying more and getting less while even more young Albertans will be priced out of having the opportunity to get higher education. There is no plan to get women back to work who have been disproportionately hurt by the COVID-19 pandemic. There is no plan to revitalize downtown Calgary and to rebuild the economic heart of our province while this government continues to cut \$53.5 million in income support for Alberta's most vulnerable.

This budget needed to set Alberta up for a new, more diversified path to an economic recovery. It did nothing of the sort. That's why our caucus, through albertasfuture.ca, held our own budget consultations to hear exactly what Albertans wanted to see in Budget 2021 to kick-start our economic recovery. Albertans from across the province shared their hopes for bold new investments in small businesses, tech, agriculture, renewable energy, and so much more to start building a new and diversified economy. But all we got was the same old cuts and corporate handouts while Albertans are left to pick up the tab.

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

Homelessness Strategy for Pandemic Preparation

Mr. Jeremy Nixon: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. This past week I had the chance to volunteer at the Seed shelter and see first-hand the tremendous effort that has been put in place to create a safe shelter. At the start of the pandemic I approached the minister of social services with concern for the homeless. After managing shelters before, including working at the Mustard Seed through H1N1 and SARS, I was worried. Shelters have become monolithic in size, often with hundreds of people sleeping mere inches from each other. This was a devastating crisis waiting to happen.

At the time I shared an article with the minister written by Stephen Gaetz and Kristy Buccieri, entitled *The Challenges of Pandemic Planning in the Context of Homelessness*. This report shares the findings of research taken from 2010 to 2011 assessing pandemic preparedness. It offered a number of suggestions that, frankly speaking, we didn't have in place. It also offered a number of useful suggestions to protect people experiencing homelessness during the pandemic. Thankfully, the government and our not-for-profit partners and faith communities rose to the challenge and responded within days, setting up additional shelter spaces, day shelters, and other resources.

1:40

The government's response includes an additional \$72 million in spending to ensure that we had capacity and that no one would be left out in the cold. Our service providers also took the opportunity to double down on housing initiatives. Both rapid rehousing and

diversion work have been instrumental in reducing people's experience with homelessness and helping others avoid spending one night in a shelter. The government's investment of \$154 million in mental health and addiction funds plus an additional \$53 million throughout COVID will have a big impact in providing much-needed support.

Now, as we sit on a year's worth of experience in managing this pandemic, we need to learn from what worked and what didn't. We need to take that knowledge to build system capacity and further cross-sectoral collaboration in pandemic planning and homeless supports.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Lethbridge Police Officer Monitoring Activities

Ms Phillips: We need to trust law enforcement. If there's no trust, there's no public safety, and in Lethbridge citizens need to see there are concrete steps being taken to restore trust. A story broke over the weekend containing disturbing details about how the Lethbridge Police Service has treated me, a reality I've been living with for four years. I filed a Police Act complaint in 2017 for in-uniform officers taking surreptitious photos of me and disseminating them on Facebook accompanied by probably defamatory statements. I got the results of that complaint in 2018. I thought it was all done. I didn't share it publicly. I didn't even tell my colleagues.

Unbeknownst to me, there was a separate investigation undertaken that I was never told about, in which I was a party apparently but never informed. That 2018 investigation found that LPS officers made a plan to follow me explicitly for political reasons. The investigation that was withheld from me was leaked to Medicine Hat TV and reported in July 2020. It came as a shock to me and to the country. I appealed the whole sorry mess. I then requested my personal documents. I got back 9,300 pages of mostly redacted files, but what I did get in there was a sheet of paper showing that multiple officers accessed my personal files several times with no law enforcement purpose listed.

Here we have an MLA and a minister that's been photographed. A plan to follow her was hatched. Her records were searched. False content about her was circulated by in-uniform police officers thousands of times, and who knows what else. I don't feel safe in my community. No wonder it is so hard to recruit women into politics. But I am not a victim. I was certainly a target by police officers who don't understand the basic lines of professional conduct. I'll be fine, but I am going to see this through on behalf of all of the people who don't have the resources I have to improve the way law enforcement conducts itself.

I have dedicated my adult life and my career to democracy. Those principles will guide everything I do to make sure there is accountability at the Lethbridge Police Service.

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

Northern Alberta

Mr. Hanson: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Fighting for a fair deal within Alberta and due recognition for northern Alberta has been a commitment of mine, even before entering provincial politics in 2015. Northern Alberta plays a key role in the prosperity of this province. Northern Albertans are the unsung heroes of our province, working hard for the benefit of all Alberta, sometimes with little to no recognition.

The majority of resource-based industries such as mining, oil and gas, and forestry have deep roots in northern Alberta. It is these roots that have made us one of the most profitable regions in the

province. My riding alone contributes 30 per cent of all the bitumen royalties to the province. According to the Northern Alberta Development Council, northern Alberta holds 100 per cent of the province's oil sands development, 21 per cent of provincial crop production, and 10 per cent of provincial livestock production. On top of that, the Regional Economic Development Initiative for Northwest Alberta reports that northwest Alberta contains 12.3 billion cubic meters of natural gas and is home to 50 per cent of all organic farmers in the province. Mr. Speaker, northeastern Alberta contains over 3 million cultivated acres of land, which is 12 per cent of Alberta's total cultivated acres. In the energy sector oil production in the northeast region for the past six years has been close to 2 billion barrels of oil equivalent annually.

Let me be clear. Northern Albertans are not looking for a pat on the back or praise from anyone. We want the resources and infrastructure to match the amount of work and capital we put into the province. Simple recognition. Mr. Speaker, it only takes one trip down highway 28 in my riding to understand how badly northern Alberta highways need attention. We are simply asking for things like primary highways with appropriate infrastructure, things like access to timely, quality health care, a family doctor that stays in the community for longer than three years, things like access to postsecondary education to keep our young people in our communities; nothing too elaborate, Mr. Speaker, just basic things that will make the north a better place to work and call home.

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

Calgary Storm Damage Insurance Coverage

Mr. Toor: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Last summer, while we were dealing with the initial effects of the pandemic, residents in northeast Calgary were also dealing with the devastating hailstorm that destroyed their personal property. From cars to siding, the damage from the hailstorm was tragic. Fortunately, our government was there to help by providing coverage for damages resulting from overland flooding through the disaster recovery program. However, while this was a welcome support, for many the coverage did not address the damages that resulted from the hail itself.

Sadly, the opposition saw the tragic hailstorm as a political opportunity, claiming that many affected residents could not afford to fix the resulting damages. The Insurance Bureau of Canada made it clear that not only was this assertion false, but more importantly they went further and verified that nearly 100 per cent of the affected residents had their claims processed and approved for repairs to personal property.

That being said, I have spoken with several constituents who have expressed great concerns over insurance companies' refusing to provide renewed coverage for their homes. Constituents who find themselves in this precarious position have not given a specific reason in many cases but have been led to believe it has to do with recurring hail damage claims in the northeast. If that proves to be the case, this is unacceptable as those affected by the hailstorm could not have avoided this reality. Insurance companies have a fiduciary duty to operate in good faith with their clients, and that cannot be ignored.

Thank you.

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

Front-line Workers

Mr. Amery: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's hard to believe that the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted our way of life for more than a

year now. Albertans across the province have made incredible sacrifices, sacrifices to how we work, how we shop, and even how we spend time with our friends and family. While we've all had to make significant adjustments, our front-line workers have refused to let these challenges stand in the way of keeping us safe.

Those who work in our hospitals, who deliver our packages, who staff our retail stores and the countless other areas of our economy have sacrificed their own safety to ensure that Albertans have access to groceries, receive their mail, and, perhaps most importantly, unrestricted access to our world-class health care system when we need it. Mr. Speaker, these brave women and men have put their own interests and mental well-being on the line to ensure that Albertans have access to the things they need. They are the workers who staff our clinics and hospitals and face the constant threat of contracting COVID-19 every day. They are the ones helping those with mental health crises in this province, and they are the community leaders who are helping families cope on the ground during these difficult times.

Mr. Speaker, there's no other way to say it: our front-line workers are the backbone of our economy and of our province. They are our family members, they are our friends, they are our neighbours, and their sacrifices have made all of our lives better. For that, they must be recognized. On behalf of my colleagues I take this opportunity to thank all of those who have worked tirelessly to get us through this pandemic.

Thank you.

Introduction of Bills

The Speaker: The hon. the Government House Leader.

Bill 53

Service Alberta Statutes (Virtual Meetings) Amendment Act, 2021

Mr. Jason Nixon: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today on behalf of the Minister of Service Alberta to introduce Bill 53, the Service Alberta Statutes (Virtual Meetings) Amendment Act, 2021.

Many Albertans are concerned about the ability to conduct meetings in person while health restrictions are in place. Our current legislation doesn't mention meeting or voting electronically, so the amendments being proposed will provide organizations with the option of having virtual meetings, electronic notifications for meetings, and electronic voting. Mr. Speaker.

Do you want me to rise on the next one, too? No? Okay. Thanks, Mr. Speaker.

[Motion carried; Bill 53 read a first time]

The Speaker: Hon. members, we will revert to Introduction of Bills immediately following Oral Question Period.

1:50

Oral Question Period

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

Postsecondary Education Funding

Ms Notley: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to start today with something close to me as both the MLA for Edmonton-Strathcona and the parent of a university student, and that is the devastation this government is causing in postsecondary education. Since this Premier took office, he's cut \$690 million from Alberta's universities and colleges, accounting for inflation and population.

More than half of this year's budget cut alone is from the University of Alberta, \$60 million. Premier, there are tens of thousands of students who are struggling during this pandemic. Why are you making them pay for your mistakes?

Mr. Kenney: Well, Mr. Speaker, while this government is focused on protecting lives and livelihoods through the crisis, we must also ensure the sustainability of our programs, including our excellent universities and colleges. The reality is that the cost to Alberta taxpayers of subsidies to those institutions was growing far, far higher than the number of students, than inflation, than economic growth. Indeed, we ended up with, according to the MacKinnon panel, the most expensive and least efficient university system in Canada. We know that our administrators can do better. We're challenging them to do so.

Ms Notley: Well, Mr. Speaker, does the Premier want a world-class university or a national-average university? By all means, let's compete with New Brunswick. You know, it's not just the U of A. Last week I stood with students from the U of C, who have seen their tuition fees go up 10 per cent. Third-year student Noa Spivak said, quote: these budget cuts will not only negatively impact the future of Alberta; they will repel young people who may consider studying and starting their lives here. Premier, this is the brain drain we are talking about. Why are you pushing young, talented, skilled professionals out of Alberta?

Mr. Kenney: I appreciate the opportunity given to me by the leader of the NDP to highlight the fact that Alberta had the highest population growth in Canada in 2020. What a great sign of the energy and optimism around this province that even when we had the toughest hit economy because of the energy price collapse, this is one of the only provinces with net inbound interprovincial migration, maintaining the youngest population in Canada. Mr. Speaker, that's in part why companies like Infosys are locating hundreds and thousands of new jobs in this province, new jobs for young Albertans.

Ms Notley: Well, Mr. Speaker, if the Premier has his way, those statistics will reverse very quickly. It seems everyone but this government understands that a strong postsecondary sector is critical to education, innovation, and economic diversification. Giving our next generation the skills they need to succeed is the only way we are going to recover our economy and be ready for future growth. What will it take for the Premier to recognize that and stop slashing and hacking and cutting at our postsecondary system, putting all that at risk?

Mr. Kenney: Part of the ideological blindness of the NDP causes them to measure programs not by their outcomes but on how much is spent. Mr. Speaker, we spend nearly twice as much per university student as does Ontario, and their universities are as highly rated or in some cases more highly rated than Alberta institutions. Shouldn't we learn from our other high-quality Canadian public universities about how they operate more efficiently? That was Dr. Janice MacKinnon's challenge. By the way, I'm sure the Leader of the Opposition is happy to hear that the Bank of Montreal predicted Alberta will lead the national economy in 2021.

The Speaker: The hon. the Leader of the Opposition.

Budget 2021 Contingency Fund

Ms Notley: Well, Mr. Speaker, I was reminded a couple of days ago that I've passed my 13th anniversary in this House. Now, that's

quite a few budgets, but I have never seen a government come to this Assembly and ask for \$2.5 billion in unmarked bills for itself. At a time when they're raising tuition on students, sending kids into overcrowded classrooms, and firing front-line health care workers, can the Premier exercise some fiscal responsibility and commit today to providing Albertans with an exact accounting of where that \$2.5 billion is going to go?

Mr. Kenney: Mr. Speaker, the hon. the Minister of Finance has been very clear that it's very difficult for us to predict the health expenditures related to this pandemic. It's ever-changing, but what we've done – you know, I remember being here a year ago, when the NDP was trying to stop the budget that added half a billion dollars to health care. We spent 2 billion additional dollars in health care last year, \$1.25 billion set aside in the contingency this year, and additional investments for job creation: we're doing the right thing to protect lives and livelihoods.

Ms Notley: Mr. Speaker, it's not a contingency; it's an announcement slush fund, billions being promised to everything except maybe not. He says that it will go towards health care except it's a contingency, so it might not. He says that it will go towards our tourism strategy except it's a contingency, so it might not. He says that it'll go towards our manufacturing sector except it's a contingency, so it might not. We have no idea how much money is being discussed at any given time. How can the Premier possibly believe Albertans trust him with \$2.5 billion in walking-around money?

Mr. Kenney: Well, Mr. Speaker, the NDP leader knows full well that every dollar and every cent spent by the government first of all has to be approved by a vote of this Assembly and then is reported to the Assembly through the public accounts, all of which is subject to oversight by the Auditor General. But Albertans also understand in this unprecedented time that government needs the flexibility to move quickly to jump on opportunities, to address new challenges as they arise during the global health and economic crisis.

Ms Notley: This Legislature has never been asked to approve \$2.5 billion for nothing specific. That is outrageous. That is not a contingency. It's sloppy accounting. It's sneaky. It's dishonest. It's arrogant. The perfect example of this is this jobs minister randomly announcing yesterday that he's going to give an unnamed amount of money to an unnamed company for an unknown pharmaceutical venture with 10 days' notice. Let's be clear. That does not smell good, Mr. Speaker. Premier, what are you going to use this money for, and why won't you tell Albertans before we're asked to vote on it?

Mr. Kenney: Well, first of all, Mr. Speaker, I'll trust the judgment of this chartered accountant over that socialist any day of the week when it comes to the province's books. Secondly, if it weren't a contingency fund approved by the Legislature, then it would be future spending approved by the cabinet through supplementary estimates, which is far less transparent. Thirdly, now she's angry that we're investing in an Alberta pharmaceutical industry so that we can have vaccine security. The NDP left us with absolutely nothing in terms of the development of vaccines or pharmaceuticals here in Alberta. Shame on them. [interjections]

The Speaker: Order. Order.

The Leader of the Official Opposition.

Ms Notley: Two point five billion dollars without a single specific description: that's not transparency except in their world.

Northwest Territories' Use of Alberta Curriculum

Ms Notley: Now, yesterday we learned that the Northwest Territories is considering dropping the Alberta curriculum, rejecting the Premier's redesign. After more than 40 years of partnership they may move towards adopting British Columbia's curriculum instead. When we asked about this yesterday, the government repeatedly refused to answer, so I'll ask the Premier: after 40 years, why are other levels of government across this country losing faith in yours?

Mr. Kenney: Well, Mr. Speaker, in fact, it's under this government that we have seen unprecedented levels of solidarity from coast to coast supporting us in suing the federal government on their carbon tax. Right now we're challenging Bill C-69 supported by a majority of provinces; all 10 provinces, all three territories behind us on the fiscal stabilization program; all provinces applauding our efforts to increase free trade within Canada. Under the NDP Alberta was isolated and alone. Now other provinces and territories have our back.

Ms Notley: Back to the topic at hand, the real problem with Alberta's curriculum is this Premier. He appointed his buddy Chris Champion as an adviser to the design, a man who called teaching indigenous history a fad. The same man pushed hard to remove indigenous history from the classroom and go back to the 1950s-era memorization of European history. The rejection of his racist curriculum by other jurisdictions should be a wake-up call. If other Canadians don't want this curriculum, why does the Premier think Albertans do?

2:00

Mr. Kenney: There she goes, Mr. Speaker. Anybody that she doesn't like or disagrees with is a racist. Shame on them. [interjections] This morning the Minister of Education . . .

The Speaker: Order. I hesitate to comment on things that I may or may not have heard on or off the record, but if I did hear the hon. Member for Edmonton-North West imply that the Premier was a racist, that would be wildly unacceptable.

The hon. the Premier has the call.

Mr. Kenney: It would be unacceptable but par for the course for them, Mr. Speaker.

This morning the Minister of Education had a great conversation with Minister Simpson from the Northwest Territories, and they spoke about the progress we've made in the curricula development process. Minister Simpson was very pleased with our commitment to addressing key principles of reconciliation and First Nations in our draft curriculum, and she was clear that the Northwest Territories are simply going through their normal curriculum review process as the previous five-year agreement they have with Alberta is coming to an end in September.

Ms Notley: Yet she didn't commit to staying for the next 40 years.

We just learned Mr. Champion billed Albertans for 38 days of curriculum writing. Here are some titles of his other written works: Equality, but Not if It Costs; Who Should Pay for Self-inflicted Ailments? As Demands Grow for Free AIDS Treatment; and Alberta's Little History War, where he claims the blanket exercise brainwashes children. Mr. Speaker, the reputational damage this is doing is a distant second to the damage that will be done to the children of this province by this curriculum. Why won't the Premier fire Mr. Champion and put actual educators on the curriculum?

Mr. Kenney: Well, Mr. Speaker, my colleagues here will confirm that one of the reasons the NDP government was fired in the worst

trouncing of an incumbent government in modern Alberta history is because they were trying to inject their socialist ideology into our curriculum. They did it in secret. They wouldn't release the socialists who were working on the draft curriculum. We've been perfectly transparent. This government was elected to put an emphasis on basic skills and knowledge, on numeracy, on literacy, yes, on historical literacy, not on NDP socialist ideology. [interjections]

The Speaker: The hon. member – order. Order. The Leader of the Opposition has had her opportunity. Now it's the hon. Member for Edmonton-City Centre.

Health Care Workforce and Budget 2021

Mr. Shepherd: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today in estimates I gave the Minister of Health a chance to make amends for the damage and distrust he's sown amongst our health care heroes. These are people who put their lives on the line. While we were told to keep our distance and stay home as much as possible, they worked around the clock to care for people infected with COVID-19. Today I asked the minister to commit that he would not fire these workers once the pandemic is over. He balked at the question, so I'm going to try the Premier. Premier, can you explain why some of these front-line heroes will get nothing from you more than a pink slip when this is all over?

Mr. Shandro: Mr. Speaker, happy to respond again to the hon. member. As I said to him this morning, we are increasing the employees within AHS by 2,940 full-time equivalents. Now, the hon. member is asking about the implementation of certain recommendations in a performance review of AHS, a performance review, I reminded him this morning, that he lauded and complimented as being common sense. Now, some of these recommendations, as AHS came to us in how they would be implemented because of the pandemic: we asked AHS to continue with a balanced and thoughtful approach because of the pandemic.

Mr. Shepherd: Mr. Speaker, over the noon hour I was joined by Elly O'Greyslik, a registered nurse and postsecondary educator, to talk about the unthinkable challenges she and her colleagues have faced during this pandemic. She said, "Our healthcare system can't stand to lose any staff. People are already exhausted . . . I worry that the pressure within the system to stick to the budget will cause our units to implode and our patients and staff to suffer." I want to thank Elly for her compassion and courage during this pandemic. Premier, will you now explain to Elly why she or her colleagues may be out of a job after this pandemic is over?

Mr. Shandro: Mr. Speaker, we're not keeping the Health budget at par. We are increasing it by \$900 million. Setting aside what we would be budgeting for the response to the COVID pandemic, we are increasing the health care budget in the largest percentage in the history of this province because we have said to Albertans that we are here to protect lives and livelihoods and that the resources would not be a concern as we continue to make sure that the patients and Albertans are, first and foremost, our primary concern in the pandemic.

Mr. Shepherd: Once again, Mr. Speaker, no guarantee to Elly or her colleagues that they will still have a job once this pandemic is done.

The Premier campaigned under the banner of a public health guarantee. He signed a giant piece of cardboard with those words written on it: public health guarantee. Now he plans to cut 11,000 jobs in public health care, a move that anyone who actually talks to

front-line workers knows will create unprecedented chaos in our hospitals. So to the Premier: will you admit once and for all that the only guarantee Albertans can count on when it comes to your government and public health care is a plan to slash and burn the moment this pandemic is done?

Mr. Kenney: Mr. Speaker, I want to thank the member opposite for highlighting this government's public health guarantee to maintain or increase health funding in a publicly funded, universally accessible system. Exactly, promise made; promise kept because this government has increased health care funding by a billion dollars – that's the baseline – in addition to \$2 billion in support for the pandemic last year. Only in the strange world of the NDP would they see the largest Health budget in history and a billion-dollar increase as a cut. Why don't they stop misleading Albertans?

Rural Issues

Mr. Loewen: Mr. Speaker, as you know from your visits to my riding, I represent a large portion of rural Alberta, mostly farms, small towns, and villages spread over a vast portion of Alberta's beautiful Peace River country. Because of the vastness of the area, some government services cost a little more than urban areas. We've seen the opposition benches focus on spending and services in urban centres, but I know a strong and healthy rural Alberta is a strong Alberta for much of our economy is based on the food, energy, and raw materials produced in rural Alberta. To the minister: with the budget focus on lives and livelihoods, what projects and programs for rural Alberta is this budget funding?

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

Mr. Toews: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the member for the question. I absolutely agree that rural Alberta will be pivotal to economic recovery in the province of Alberta. We are investing a big percentage of the \$3 billion over the next three years in capital maintenance and renewal efforts in rural Alberta. We're investing in specific capital projects such as the \$120 million investment in irrigation over the next three years, a new maternity centre in La Crête, Alberta, a new high school in Camrose, upgrades to a youth centre in Lac La Biche, and the twinning of highway 3 and widening of highway 40.

Mr. Loewen: Given that municipal taxes on industry in my riding are crucial to many locally delivered services and given that I've had many mayors and councillors speak to me and other rural colleagues about the need to collect unpaid taxes from oil and gas companies and given that our energy sector has been recovering from the price war last year and given that there are a multitude of ways that we can protect lives and livelihoods, to the Minister of Energy: we know that this issue is a complicated one, but what work is being done to ensure that payment of municipal taxes is occurring without driving energy companies away and, by extension, good jobs for rural Albertans?

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Energy.

Mrs. Savage: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. We recognize that the oil and gas industry has been struggling for a number of years, at least six years, with low prices and a lack of pipeline capacity. While the vast majority of these companies are paying their municipal taxes, there are some that aren't. These are the same companies that aren't paying their AER levies, that aren't paying landowners, that aren't paying their environmental responsibilities, and they even aren't paying royalties. We're doing everything we

can to make these companies competitive, to improve the operating conditions so that they can start paying their taxes, they can get up to speed, and they can be competitive.

Mr. Loewen: Given that the loss of jobs from rural areas means that there's a loss of families in these communities and given that the further loss of population affects the number of teachers, doctors, and other jobs in rural Alberta and given that we want healthy rural communities to have jobs in our resource sectors rather than isolated work camps where they commute from big cities, to the Minister of Jobs, Economy and Innovation: what are you doing to promote job growth in rural Alberta?

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

Mr. Toews: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. We're making a \$20.7 billion capital investment over the next three years across this province, much of it in rural Alberta. It will create, support up to 50,000 direct jobs, 40,000 indirect jobs. We're also funding sector strategies – sectors in agriculture, energy, and manufacturing – that will revitalize our rural communities, lead to increased investment attraction and increased job opportunities for rural Albertans.

2:10 Public Service Pension Fund Administration

Ms Phillips: The UCP is playing politics with Albertans' retirement security. They've quashed debate on now two bills to protect our Canada pension plan and the retirement security of hundreds of thousands of Albertans who've been on the front line of this pandemic. Thousands of Albertans have told us, everyone in this House, that they want this debate, so will the Finance minister explain why he won't listen to Albertans who are worried about their retirement and, failing that, why he won't have the debate on the floor of this Legislature? What is he afraid of?

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

Mr. Toews: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. Here's the first salient reality: I'm not a member of the committee. This government and all Albertans have a congruent interest in well-performing, secure pensions, and I can commit that Budget 2021, along with our efforts to amalgamate the investment function under AIMCo for our public service pension plans, will strengthen public service pensions to the betterment of public-sector employees and Alberta taxpayers.

Ms Phillips: Given that my bill would have protected pensions for Albertans like teachers and firefighters and given that while every single member of this Assembly has heard from thousands of teachers and firefighters and given that the UCP called these Albertans misinformed yesterday, will the Minister of Finance commit to an open town hall meeting with Albertans worried about his pension scheme so that he can tell them directly why he thinks they're misinformed?

Mr. Toews: Mr. Speaker, I'm happy to meet with teachers and public-sector workers across the province, and I have been doing that. Here is the other reality. Their union bosses have been out spreading misinformation about our approach and the efficiencies that are created and the benefits to Alberta teachers and Alberta public-sector workers around amalgamating the pension investment function under AIMCo. Again, our values and goals are congruent. It will result in strengthened pensions and lower premiums than what they would otherwise be.

Ms Phillips: Well, given, Mr. Speaker, that I just heard that the president of the Alberta Fire Fighters Association is out spreading misinformation and given that my bill would have given those firefighters representation on the AIMCo board, will the minister try to repair that relationship with the firefighters that he just caused grave injury to by committing to changing some of his existing government appointees so that those firefighters can have a window into his plan to reduce their pensions?

Mr. Toews: Mr. Speaker, again, it's in the government's best interest, public-sector workers' best interests, and Alberta taxpayers' best interests to see strong pension plans. We have a congruent interest. The members opposite weakened the competency at AIMCo. We brought in changes that ensure the correct competencies and skills at the AIMCo board level. We will continue to ensure that AIMCo can deliver to Alberta taxpayers and Alberta public-sector workers.

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

Justice Ministry Funding

Mr. Sabir: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On budget day many Albertans were hoping to see a significant investment in our justice system; namely, in support for victims of crime, systemic racism, and real reforms. Unfortunately, not only did the minister fail to make investments in the Justice budget; he actually levelled a \$65 million massive cut on the ministry and chalked it up to modernization. Minister, we need more funding to support people who have been the victims of crime. Will you admit that there is nothing modern about cutting victims of crime supports?

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

Mr. Toews: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would agree with the member opposite that there are victims of crime across this province, and we need to step out to support those victims with a strong justice system. The Minister of Justice has been making reforms and modernizing the department to result in increased efficiencies in the delivery of justice across this province. That is the approach that we're taking to every ministry as we're looking to improve the efficacy of programs and provide better value to Albertans.

Mr. Sabir: Given that there have been six reported hate attacks on black Muslim hijab-wearing women in Edmonton in recent weeks and given that we have tiki torch marches on the streets of this city and in Calgary and given that I have spoken to the family of one victim of these attacks and they want more resources to crack down on marches being organized by racists so they can feel safe in their home and communities, Minister, how do you justify reducing Justice funding when we actually need more resources to improve safety in our major cities and rural Alberta?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Culture, Multiculturalism and Status of Women.

Mrs. Aheer: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I would like to first of all congratulate the Minister of Justice on his work, especially when it comes to racism. Not only has he changed carding, one of the most racist acts that happened on the street, something that could have been done by their government and was asked for on multiple occasions by the indigenous folks and by black Albertans to have that changed – he did that, first and foremost. Also, Bill 38 brings

forward all sorts of incredible and important changes to the justice act, especially on police reform, again one of the first times ever in this province's history to see a minister going to this level to make sure that racism is challenged.

Mr. Sabir: Given that one of the largest expense cuts in the horrible Justice budget is a nearly \$17 million reduction to remand and correctional centres and given that correctional centres have been the source of massive COVID-19 outbreaks and that we have correctional centre workers who have tested positive for COVID-19 being told that they still needed to come to work because there was no one else to replace them, how can this possibly be the year that you set out to slash funding for the Justice ministry?

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

Mr. Toews: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. We know that the Minister of Health and the officials at Health are working hard across the province to ensure that Albertans are protected from COVID. In terms of correctional institutes, I know that that work is taking place there as well. In the big picture, again, the Minister of Justice is working hard to find efficiencies, to ensure that we as a government can deliver well on behalf of Albertans and on behalf of Alberta taxpayers.

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

Critical Worker Benefit Eligibility

Mr. Toor: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Our government recently announced the critical worker benefit for those on the front lines of the pandemic. However, some groups are not eligible for this support, groups like cab drivers, who have ensured the safe and timely transport of many individuals throughout the pandemic. To the Minister of Labour and Immigration: why are cab drivers not included in this program, and how did you determine eligibility for this program?

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Labour and Immigration.

Mr. Copping: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the hon. member for the question. We acknowledge the tremendous contributions of all Alberta workers who continue to work during this pandemic. In fact, more than 80 per cent of employees continued to work throughout this entire period. In developing the critical worker benefit program, this government focused on the 16-week period during the second wave, which meets the federal criteria. Alberta's government is directing funds towards health care workers, critical front-line workers, and those who are essential to the supply of food and medicine, and Alberta's government continues to support all Albertans through the COVID-19 pandemic by protecting lives and livelihoods with precise measures to bend the curve, sustain small businesses, and protect . . .

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

Mr. Toor: Thank you, Minister. Given that groups like cab drivers have also been on the front line of the pandemic since it began and given that the president of the United Taxi Group, Dawinder Deo, was live on air with My Radio 580 to convey a very convincing position that justifies the inclusion of cab drivers and while I note that my office just received a letter from Alberta Co-op Taxi requesting to be included in the program, to the same minister: have

you reached out to the United Taxi Group or the other groups they represent which are not included in the program?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Labour and Immigration.

Mr. Copping: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you again to the hon. member for the question. There was thoughtful deliberation that went into determining the eligibility criteria for the critical worker benefit program. Our government acknowledges the contribution of all workers who worked throughout the pandemic. Alberta's government directed the available funds towards health care workers, critical front-line workers, and those who are essential to the supply of food and medicines. Again, we continue to support all Albertans through the COVID-19 pandemic with precise measures to bend the curve, programs to sustain small businesses, and measures to protect Alberta's health care system.

Mr. Toor: Thank you, Minister. Given the response from the Minister of Labour and Immigration and given that taxi drivers have proudly provided their critical front-line services through this pandemic, can the Minister of Jobs, Economy and Innovation advise if these subcontractors or sole proprietors are eligible for Alberta's relaunch grant? If not, can the minister commit to helping these deserving Albertans access similar financial support?

2:20

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

Mr. Toews: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the member for the question. Sole proprietors are eligible under the SME relaunch grant and under the advanced COVID business benefit when it launches in the future. We've approved funding for more than 58,000 businesses under the SME relaunch grant, totalling over \$405 million. These businesses employ more than 260,000 Albertans. We know they're critical to the Alberta economic recovery, and we will be there to support them.

Income Support Program Funding

Ms Renaud: I'm concerned that barriers to full employment income support is getting cut by \$53.5 million. The minister's press secretary claimed that this is simply because of decreased caseload. I'm not sure how this adds up. Yes, there are about 2,500 fewer people on barriers to full employment support this year, but a cut of that size exceeds any caseload changes pulled from your own open data. Minister, please explain to me how you can make these drastic cuts to income support. The math doesn't make any sense.

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Children's Services has risen.

Ms Schulz: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. To say that there is a cut in this line item in the budget is completely false and a misrepresentation of numbers. I will say, as the Premier and the Minister of Finance and the Minister of Community and Social Services have said, that protecting lives and livelihoods for all Albertans remains our top priority. That's why this program, the income support program, remains fully funded according to demand. The core benefit rates: there is no change. They are being maintained, and eligibility criteria remain the same. Any eligible Albertan may receive these income support benefits, and this has not and will not change.

Ms Renaud: Given that the UCP's claim that their cuts to income supports are merely based on the fact that new federal supports

came into play makes no sense and given that the UCP is reducing income support for the next two years, but federal emergency programs will be done this year, Minister, are you really trying to use the cover of a global health crisis to continue making devastating cuts to income support? Like it or not, you cut over \$53 million. It's in your budget documents. Fact.

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

Ms Schulz: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Just to be clear, rates and eligibility for income support have not changed. We do expect caseloads to increase as federal benefit programs wind down later this year, and the Minister of Community and Social Services has budgeted for this to make sure that nobody falls through the cracks. So at the beginning of the fiscal year, starting, of course, April 1, the federal government still has programs in place until at least September. The budget forecast is based on the lower estimate of clients for that time period. Budget 2021 reflects this.

Ms Renaud: Given that the facts are fairly simple, Mr. Speaker, that there is a massive cut in the Community and Social Services budget, and given that I've seen the numbers – it is minus \$53 million in income support; now, the numbers of caseloads might be slightly lower because files have transferred to the federal government – the fact remains that the budget does not meet the need. There is no plan. Word salads aren't going to wish this away. We need answers. The budget is lower. We need an answer. What are you going to do to meet the needs of disabled Albertans that are on income support?

Ms Schulz: Thank you very much to the member. I have answered the question, and spreading falsehoods doesn't make them true. Clients may need to provide updated documentation to confirm eligibility for supplementary benefits. Our excellent caseworkers are able to assist with any questions or concerns that these clients may have. But, Mr. Speaker, I will tell you that the return to prepandemic numbers has been accounted for in the forecast to ensure that nobody falls through the cracks.

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

Calgary LRT Green Line Funding

Member Ceci: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Calgary green line is a transformational project that will connect communities from the north to the south. It will provide the necessary infrastructure to support our future economy, and it will get Calgarians back to work, not only when it's built but during the construction. In fact, the project is expected to create 20,000 jobs as Calgary faces double-digit unemployment, yet the UCP continues to delay construction. Why does this government continue to delay a project that will create jobs at a time when Alberta needs them most?

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

Mr. Toews: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. This government is investing \$20.7 billion over the next year to create jobs and build critical infrastructure for Albertans. Budget 2021 reconfirms our commitment to Calgary's green line with a \$1.53 billion commitment to the green line.

Member Ceci: Given that the pandemic has hurt our economy, leading to record-high office vacancy rates in our downtown and double-digit unemployment, and given that the green line will be a central plank of any strategy to stimulate Calgary's economy,

revitalize the downtown, and refill the office towers and given that the deadline for procurement is quickly approaching – if it's missed, the entirety of the 2021 construction season will be lost and also thousands of jobs – will this government commit to approving the green line? Approving it, not just committing the dollars in a future budget but approving the green line so that procurement can happen.

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Finance.

Mr. Toews: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Minister of Transportation is working collaboratively with the city of Calgary and their newly appointed board as partners to ensure the green line is delivered in the best interests of those who need it and the taxpayers that fund it.

Member Ceci: Given that this government's constant delays on the green line are risking thousands of good jobs and given that they promised back in December there would only be a three-month delay as they reviewed the project and given that those three months have now passed without any approval in funding for the go-ahead for procurement and given that we're now approaching quickly that deadline for procurement, does the government agree that approving Calgary's green line LRT project with the current council makes the most sense for the project and the future build-out of a mass transit system that's the envy across Canada?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Toews: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again, Budget 2021 reiterated our commitment to the green line. The Minister of Transportation is working with the city of Calgary to determine the best path forward on the green line. We're committed to providing taxpayers of this province with value as we make strategic capital investments funded through Budget 2021. We need to ensure that they are positioned to be delivered most efficiently and most effectively for Albertans.

Coal Development Policies

Mr. Sigurdson: Mr. Speaker, Alberta's coal policy is vital to the residents of Highwood, and the coal policy in its relationship to the eastern slopes has become an important topic of discussion for Highwood residents and all Albertans. Alberta is an environmental leader in the world in every aspect, and Albertans should be proud of our strong record of environmental stewardship. Given that I know that this government is committed to maintaining that record and given that the minister has heard loud and clear the concern over the coal policy by Albertans, what is the Minister of Energy doing in response to the issues raised?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Energy.

Mrs. Savage: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the member for the question. We reinstated the coal policy after hearing concerns from Albertans, voiced very passionately and very loudly, that they felt that some restrictions and some environmental protections had been lost. It had never been our intention to do that. Our intention was simply to align the management of coal with how we manage other resources like oil and gas. So we reinstated the coal policy to ensure that Albertans can be heard. We will be opening and starting consultations on March 29 to hear from Albertans what they would like us to do next.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Highwood.

Mr. Sigurdson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the minister for that answer. Given that there has been a reinstatement of the coal policy and given that you have committed to an extensive consultation with communities, landowners, farmers and ranchers, and all Albertans and given that Albertans are still concerned about what this consultation will look like, can the Minister of Energy explain how and when Albertans can engage in the process and take part in the very important discussion about the modernization of the coal policy?

The Speaker: The Minister of Energy.

Mrs. Savage: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you for the question. We will be starting consultations on March 29. We're finalizing the scope of review and the terms of reference, but it will be consultations by Albertans, for Albertans, to hear broadly the views of all the stakeholders: all the landowners, all the communities, all the municipalities who expressed concerns. We will also be doing separate indigenous consultations to hear from First Nation communities on their views. We'll be hearing more about it and how that will proceed in the days ahead.

2:30

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Sigurdson: Once again thank you to the minister, and thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that there was an incredible amount of concern given to all of us from the public and given that there's still ongoing concern regarding issued leases and ongoing exploration in the eastern slopes, can the Minister of Energy tell Albertans why you felt the reinstatement of the '76 coal policy was a very important step to help reinforce the interests of the public?

Mrs. Savage: Well, thank you for that question. I heard very significant concerns from Albertans, as did the Member for Highwood. I heard those voices. We heard from them. They were very concerned that some protections had been lost. Albertans love their mountains. Albertans love their mountains, and they told us that, Mr. Speaker, so we reinstated the coal policy. It's important to Albertans to get this right and to hear from them and hear their views as we move forward with a modern coal policy to ensure that Albertans can continue to enjoy the mountains and that we can develop resources responsibly.

Economic Recovery and Child Care Funding

Ms Pancholi: Mr. Speaker, this government's plan for economic recovery is not a plan at all. They've missed what every economist in Canada has been saying from the beginning, that this is a 'shecession.' Women have been hit hardest, and we need a plan that understands that. While billions of dollars are planned for infrastructure projects, not one dollar more is invested in child care. Child care is the shovel-ready infrastructure parents need to work. We would never accept 50 per cent of our bridges or roads being out of commission, but this government is willing to accept just that for child care. To the Minister of Finance. Your job is to get our economy back on track. What are you doing to ensure that child care infrastructure is there to stimulate jobs and economic growth?

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

Ms Schulz: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. As I've said before, we absolutely know that child care is an important part of Alberta's economic recovery. I do know that first-hand as I am a parent of two young children, and many of my constituents have young children as well. That is why the government of Alberta

continues to invest nearly \$400 million a year in child care. We continue to gather feedback from Alberta parents because we also want to support the choices that Alberta parents are making. One exciting thing that's happening right now as part of our relationship with the federal government is that we have an expression of interest open to create new spaces in areas of need across Alberta.

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

Ms Pancholi: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that the Minister of Finance does not seem to be as concerned about women's economic recovery but given that experts and economists across the country and around the world like Bank of Canada's Tiff Macklem and AIMCo's Mark Wiseman agree that investment in early learning and child care is vital to a speedy economic recovery and given that governments across the country agree that providing more early learning and child care is a major policy lever to maximize growth both in the short run and the long run and are pumping up their investment in early learning and child care, again to the Minister of Finance: why have you tabled a budget that ignores the most effective economic and job-growth strategy that we can take?

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

Ms Schulz: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm happy to talk about this very important topic. In fact, just two weeks ago we had a meeting with all of my counterparts responsible for child care right across the country. We are committed to working across the country at different levels of government to address this very real issue. However, what we won't do is what the members opposite have done, which is to continue to push an ideological agenda. We're going to work together. All provinces across the country have asked for flexibility because we want to meet the needs of working parents right across our province and respect the choices that they're making.

Ms Pancholi: Given that Alberta's economic recovery requires more than just one minister to take child care seriously and given that these same experts and economists have grave concerns over the drop in economic participation by women in Alberta to a level not seen for 40 years and given that without immediate actions lowered participation rates could become permanent, slowing economic growth, reducing our productivity and our GDP, and given that recovering Alberta is already lagging behind all other provinces in terms of recovery, to the Minister of Finance: when can we expect the government to step into the 21st century and provide the leadership needed today by women and a modern economy?

Mr. Toews: Well, Mr. Speaker, I leave child care issues appropriately with our children's minister, who does an excellent job. It's already been pointed out that Budget 2021 ensures significant funding for child care in this province, but as importantly Budget 2021 includes an economic recovery plan that will reposition Alberta's service sector for growth and recovery. We know that many women work in that sector, were disproportionately affected by the downturn. We are putting the building blocks in place for key economic recovery. [interjections]

The Speaker: Order. Order. You wanted the Minister of Finance to answer. He did. Perhaps you might allow the Speaker to hear the answer as well.

Mr. Bilous: Mr. Speaker, I'm going to let this government in on a secret they appear to have missed when they created their so-called

recovery plan: investing in child care is investing in the economy. This government is failing Albertans by failing to make this investment. This pandemic has disproportionately affected women, and this government is not making the investments to address this. To the Minister of Finance. Really, this is a government-wide issue, not an individual minister's issue. Why does your budget fail to make this critical and obvious investment to help make Alberta's economic recovery?

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

Mr. Toews: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. As I previously stated, Budget 2021 funds child care across this province. Our Children's Services minister is doing an excellent job at ensuring best value for Albertans as well as ensuring that Alberta parents across this province have great child care options. We're doing more than that. We're ensuring that we're positioning this province for economic recovery and growth, which will disproportionately help women who have been affected severely by the downturn. [interjections]

The Speaker: Order.

Mr. Bilous: Given that economists are advocating for government investments in child care and that this government has failed to act and given that we put forward a broad proposal for universal, affordable child care and early learning – I encourage the minister to visit albertasfuture.ca for details – and given that for every dollar invested in child care, there is a return on investment of \$2 and given that the minister will only say that he's working on policy development, Minister, will you commit that when you're finally done working on policies, affordable child care for every single Alberta family will be included, and if not . . .

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

Ms Schulz: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Once again, I absolutely know, as do all my colleagues, that child care is an important part of our economic recovery. However, the pilot program that was undertaken by the former government: feedback on that very pilot suggested that not only Albertans but those participating in the pilot thought that any child care programs in the province have to do a better job of actually reflecting need, employment income. We still have to be responsible with taxpayer dollars, but we will continue to look at data to drive our decisions.

Mr. Bilous: Mr. Speaker, given that there is ample evidence in other jurisdictions in Canada on the return on investment not just for families in need but for universal, affordable child care and given that this Minister of Finance is not interested in investing in something that actually creates jobs and boosts the economy, Minister, the message is clear. There is no economic recovery without universal, affordable child care. Why won't you listen to the economists and experts?

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

Ms Schulz: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Now, there are a couple of things that we heard from Albertans that we have to take into account. One is that any quick, quick move to universal child care that we've seen in other jurisdictions has actually at times put quality at risk. We want to move forward in making sure that we maintain accessibility by creating spaces right across this province, which we are doing. We also want to continue to ensure that we have high-quality programs, especially for children with special

needs, and we want to be respectful of taxpayer dollars. I want to know: how high would they raise a PST to pay for their billion-dollar plan? [interjections]

The Speaker: Order. Order. I had no problem hearing the hon. member's question. I did however have some significant challenges hearing the answer. [interjections] Order. I think the hon. Member for Edmonton-North West has already been in trouble once this question period. Perhaps he might come to order.

Care Facility Funding

Ms Armstrong-Homeniuk: Mr. Speaker, seniors in continuing care have faced great hardships recently with the COVID-19 pandemic. Seniors have been isolated, their facilities short-staffed, and seniors sacrificed seeing their families due to their vulnerable health. More than ever, seniors in continuing care facilities need all the support they can get. To the Minister of Health: how is Alberta's government supporting continuing care services?

2:40

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Health.

Mr. Shandro: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. We moved quickly to protect Alberta's most vulnerable. We're providing \$260 million to contracted continuing care operators for more staff, for the \$2-per-hour wage top-up to health care aides, and for other costs. Through Budget '21 we're providing record investments in health care. In addition to the \$1.25 billion in one-time COVID funding, Budget '21 also includes over \$3.5 billion for continuing care. Our death rate is significantly lower here in Alberta than the national average, most of Europe, and almost every single U.S. state. We're going to learn from this pandemic and continue . . .

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

Ms Armstrong-Homeniuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that part of the continuing care funding boost announcement gave over \$500 million in capital funding over the next three years and given that \$154 million of that funding will upgrade or develop new long-term care living spaces in priority communities across the province, to the Minister of Health: what factors determine a priority community, and can you give examples of who will be included?

The Speaker: The Minister of Health.

Mr. Shandro: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. AHS conducted a robust analysis to look at the priority communities where the demand for continuing care spaces exceeds the current capacity. The analysis considered factors such as the current and projected demand, the existing capacity, demographic considerations like age, and disease prevalence. As the member noted, we're investing \$154 million to upgrade or develop new long-term care and designated supportive living spaces in those priority communities across the province. Alberta's government will continue to work with the community and nonprofit partners to do this.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Armstrong-Homeniuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that organizations such as the Christian Health Association will receive financial supports to help seniors in their facilities and given that my constituents of Fort Saskatchewan-Vegreville – there are many facilities that belong to the Christian Health Association. To the

same minister: how are health organizations such as the Christian Health Association of Alberta spreading their funds across the province?

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health.

Mr. Shandro: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. For clarification, the Christian Health Association of Alberta represents and advocates for faith-based health operators. It's not an organization that provides direct health services to Albertans. Alberta Health Services contracts with the CHAA members and their member organizations to provide continuing care services across the province, a reminder that the contracted facilities include independent ones as well as nonprofit and voluntary ones. The CHAA members have been receiving additional funding through the \$260 million that I mentioned previously.

The Speaker: Hon. members, that concludes the time allotted for question period, and we will proceed immediately to the Introduction of Bills.

Introduction of Bills

(continued)

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Education.

Bill 55

College of Alberta School Superintendents Act

Member LaGrange: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to introduce first reading of Bill 55, the College of Alberta School Superintendents Act.

With this legislation Alberta's government is creating a professional organization for school system leaders that will strengthen the kindergarten to grade 12 education system for all students. Last year we spoke to our education partners about possible options to enhance how education system leaders are governed. Mr. Speaker, this bill is the result of that consultation and engagement with our education partners. If passed, this bill will result in the College of Alberta School Superintendents being responsible for setting professional learning requirements and offering professional development to its regulated members. Superintendents play a critical, important role in making sure that every student receives a high-quality education and are part of a system that also includes parents, teachers, principals, and trustees all working together to achieve the best possible outcomes for our students. I look forward to discussing and debating this important bill with the House in the very near future.

I am both proud and honoured to move first reading of Bill 55. Thank you so much, Mr. Speaker.

[Motion carried; Bill 55 read a first time]

Tabling Returns and Reports

Mr. Sigurdson: Mr. Speaker, in accordance with section 20(2) of the Auditor General Act and as deputy chair of the Standing Committee on Legislative Offices I'm pleased to table the appropriate number of copies of the Alberta Advanced Education Report on Post-Secondary Institutions, 2020. All members will receive an electronic copy of this report.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Lethbridge-West has a tabling.

Ms Phillips: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm just going to table the requisite number of copies of an analysis by the city of Lethbridge indicating that the decision to consolidate fire and EMS will cost

the city of Lethbridge taxpayers almost \$5 million. It's the document I referred to in debate yesterday.

The Speaker: Are there others?

I see the hon. the Minister of Infrastructure has risen. I'm not sure why, but proceed.

Mr. Panda: Tablings: did I miss it?

The Speaker: Yeah. Unfortunately, you missed tablings. You needed to rise at Tabling Returns and Reports. Like, when I asked if there were any others, that would have been a perfect opportunity for you to rise. We've now moved to Tablings to the Clerk. Unfortunately, we'll need to have that document tabled tomorrow.

Hon. members, pursuant to Standing Order 59.01(5)(b) the Assembly stands adjourned until tomorrow afternoon at 1:30.

The legislative policy committees will convene this afternoon, this evening, and tomorrow morning for consideration of main

estimates. This afternoon the Standing Committee on Families and Communities will consider the estimates for the Ministry of Health in the Rocky Mountain Room, and the Standing Committee on Resource Stewardship will consider the main estimates for the Treasury Board and the Ministry of Finance in the Grassland Room. This evening the Standing Committee on Alberta's Economic Future will consider the estimates for the Ministry of Jobs, Economy and Innovation in the Grassland Room, and the Standing Committee on Resource Stewardship will consider the estimates for the Ministry of Municipal Affairs in the Rocky Mountain Room. Tomorrow morning the Standing Committee on Families and Communities will consider the estimates for the Ministry of Education in the Rocky Mountain Room, and the Standing Committee on Resource Stewardship will consider the estimates for the Ministry of Indigenous Relations in the Grassland Room.

Hon. members, the House stands adjourned.

[The Assembly adjourned at 2:47 p.m.]

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